



Product
Growth
Leaders

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF **PRODUCT MANAGEMENT**

SECOND EDITION

BY STEVE JOHNSON

Copyright © 2024 Steve Johnson

Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

You are free to:

Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially.

Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

Some content in this ebook is adapted from *The Strategic Role of Product Management*, written by Steve Johnson. Copyright © 2008-2009 Pragmatic Marketing, Inc. The copyright holder has licensed this work under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License.

CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

2

THE STRATEGIC ROLE

3

HOW AGILE CREATED ROLE CHAOS

4

QUARTZ: A PRODUCT PLANNING METHODOLOGY

5

RECLAIMING PRODUCT MANAGEMENT



INTRODUCTION

Introduction

I have been writing about product management since 1999. Here's how I started: Someone asked me to explain an aspect of product management, and I wrote a long email back. A few weeks later, a similar request came in, and I wrote another long email. And then a third. Finally, I realized these were common problems that I should address once and for all. (You know, like a product!) So, I wrote a long article for my blog and started sharing the link instead of writing a new email each time.

In 2008, I was a vice president and instructor for Pragmatic Marketing. I wrote **The Strategic Role of Product Management** based on these recurring emails and inquiries, and over 100,000 people downloaded the ebook.



Steve Johnson is an author, speaker, and product coach focusing on modern methods for product strategy, planning, and growth.

Steve was a long-time executive and instructor at Pragmatic Marketing.

Today, Steve is CEO and cofounder of Product Growth Leaders, a consultancy specializing in product team transformations.



A lot has changed since then.

In those days, companies relied more on intuition and a few sales discussions to determine which products and features to build. The message to “listen to the market” was a breath of fresh air for product managers and others who had failed with the “build it and they will come” approach.

Then, the product manager title was less well-known and poorly understood. Today, product management is a specialization in many university programs and one of the top jobs desired by recent graduates.

Agile methods were new initiatives for many companies in 2008; today, they’re pretty much the industry standard. However, the Scrum method introduced a new role—the product owner—that added even more confusion to roles and responsibilities.

But some things haven't changed.

The strategic role of product management is as critical as ever.

As companies strive to create products that not only meet market demands but also drive sustainable growth, understanding the strategic importance of product management is essential.

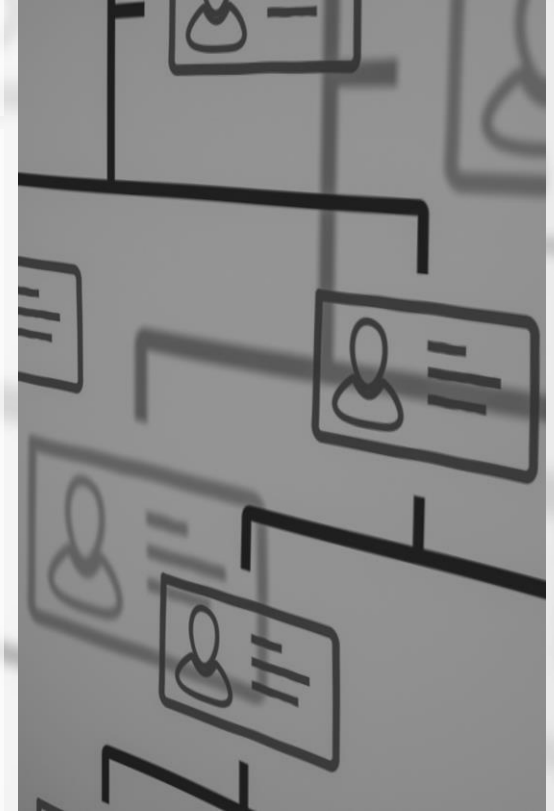
Great product managers still focus on problems in the market, identify friction for those who buy and use our products, and systematically turn good ideas into successful products.

Yet, many organizations still grapple with defining and implementing effective product management practices. Role confusion, especially with the advent of

Agile methodologies, has led to diminished strategic focus.

But what exactly does strategic product management entail, and how has it evolved over the years?

Let's delve into today's world of product management, exploring its evolution, challenges, and the frameworks that can guide organizations toward consistent success.



A founder's journey

Your founder, a brilliant technician, started the company years ago when he quit his day job to pursue his idea full-time. He created a product that he intuitively knew other people needed.

And he was right. People did want it! And the company grew.

Soon after, he hired his best friend from college as VP of Sales, who complained, "We're an engineering-led company. We need to become customer-driven." And that sounded fine.

Except... every new contract seemed to require custom work. You signed a dozen clients in a dozen market segments, and the product plans were always dominated by the latest customer requests. You concluded that "customer-driven" meant "driven by the latest customer," and that couldn't be right.

When a board member declared, "You've become a sales-led company. You need to start being marketing-driven," the founder hired a brand specialist away from a consumer products company to become the VP of Marketing.

As part of a re-branding initiative, she hired a firm to design a new corporate logo with a new color scheme for the website, new collateral, and updated promotional banners. Everyone got new company logo-ware and coffee mugs and water bottles. Except... the company spent millions without any change in revenue. Apparently, marketing-driven wasn't the answer either.

Soon the CFO whispered to the founder, "Don't you think it's time we started controlling costs?"

So the company became cost-driven and started cutting all the luxuries out of the business, like travel, training, conferences, technical support, bonuses, and award dinners. And most of the marketing promotions and programs.

At some point, after cost-cutting had gone too far, the founder stepped back in to focus on his roots—the technology—and the cycle began again.

The VP of Development says, “Customers don’t know what they want.” The VP of Sales says, “I can sell anything.” The VP of Marketing says, “We just have to establish a brand.” The VP of Finance says, “We have to control spending.”


The focus goes from technology to revenue to branding to cost-containment and back to technology, over and over again.



This story is all too familiar to investors, executives, and product managers. What is needed is someone to be in the market, on the president’s behalf, doing just what the president did in the early days.

That is, we need someone to listen to the market.

We need a strategic product management function that serves as the voice of the market, aligning all departments toward a common goal based on real customer needs and market opportunities.



Product management is my trick to a turnaround. If I can get product management focused on the market and its problems, then the company can be saved.



President and serial entrepreneur

Stop listening to each other. Start listening to the market.

Product managers research markets and their problems, identify and prioritize opportunities to ensure strategic fit, and then articulate the problems to the rest of the organization.

Our goal is to be...

Systematic, defining and delivering using a repeatable process.

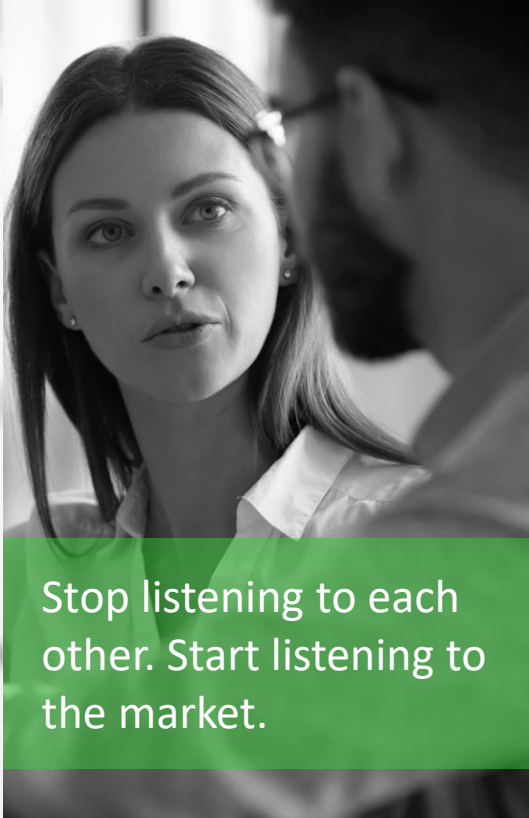
Consistent, using the same tools, terminology, and templates across products.

Transparent, providing visibility to all teams with roadmaps, plans, and schedules... as well as the process of how decisions are made.

SYSTEMATIC

CONSISTENT

TRANSPARENT



Stop listening to each other. Start listening to the market.



2 THE STRATEGIC ROLE



The strategic role of product management

Product management and product marketing have been in the news lately, with hundreds of posts about product roles and their overlap with design, development, sales, marketing, and other roles.

Product managers SHOULD be doing prototypes and wireframes; product managers SHOULD NOT be doing prototypes and wireframes; product managers are ALSO project managers; product managers are NOT project managers; product managers SHOULD assign tasks; product managers SHOULD NEVER assign tasks; product managers SHOULD go on sales calls; product managers SHOULD NEVER go on sales calls; product managers should be doing something else, and hey, maybe product managers should be called something else.

There is a lot of variety in what people claim as product management responsibilities or what a product manager does. In these scenarios, the "product manager" often takes on tasks for departments that are under-staffed or under-skilled, such as design or project management.

Sadly, in many cases, the product manager does everything no one else wants to do.

Product management is about the **WHO** and the **WHAT**, not the **HOW** and **WHEN**.

Most of all, product management is about the **WHY** and **WHY SHOULD WE?**

What product
roles should be
doing



“Go-to resource”
Subject matter expert
Prototyping and design
Project management
Quality assurance
Sales support
Product demos and RFPs
Customer support

Many product managers are so busy doing other people's work, they have failed to do their own: driving the business of the product.



The business of the product

Product management is the management of the business of the product, understanding the customer and market, defining which market segments to serve (and which to ignore), discovering market problems, planning and prioritizing, and empowering other teams with industry and market information. It involves choosing when to say “yes” and when to say “no” or “not yet.”

In the classic definition, product management is about the who and the what and the why, not the how and when. That means prioritizing the right problems to solve for the right market segments and personas.

A product manager should provide context to all the teams—leadership, design, development, marketing, sales, service, and support—with insights on personas, stories, and priorities. A product manager empowers these teams with real-world insights into markets and their problems.

Context empowers the experts in design and development to solve those problems with their brilliance. Context enables stakeholders in customer success, customer support, marketing, and sales to ensure go-to-market efforts are focused on the value of the problem and its solution.



Do we need product management?

In a world of agile methods and lean startups and business pivots, the activities of product management may already be performed by someone... some by development, some by sales and marketing.

But are these the right teams?

“Shouldn’t developers just build what they want?”

Well, they can... if they are the target market. Vendors of development tools have good luck with building products for themselves but not many vendors have this luxury.

Developers want market information so they can build the right product. And they expect product managers to provide it.

“Doesn’t marketing know what the market wants?”

Do your marketing teams have expertise on the product and its capabilities? Marketing professionals are often more focused on campaigns than products.

Product managers and product marketing managers provide product and market context to marketing teams.

“Can’t salespeople tell us what to build?”

Salespeople can tell us about features individual prospects want—and this is valuable information—but this is not really what they were hired to do.

Ideally, salespeople want a product that is ready to be sold, not one that has to be finished based on prospect feedback.

Are you listening?

Management consultants and industry thought leaders remind us to “talk to your customers.” They’re almost right. You should be *listening* to your customers. And many firms believe they are.

“Our salespeople and account managers listen to customers all the time.”

Except... salespeople don’t listen to learn; **they listen to reply**. They listen for clues about what to say to close the deal.

“Our support people listen to customers daily.”

Except... support people don’t listen to learn; **they listen to resolve**. They listen for clues of what to say to close the ticket.

One VP of Marketing told me proudly that he visited customers frequently. When I asked which customers, he said, “Our regional sales reps. After all, they’re our customers.”

Alas, no. Sales reps are delightful, but they’re not your customers; they are your distribution channel.

Company executives generally believe that salespeople know their customers... and, therefore, the market. However, I’ve found that salespeople know individual clients, not necessarily the market full of clients. They know customer deals, not market opportunities.

Successful product leaders listen to learn; they listen to understand problems in their marketplace.

After all, you don’t learn much while you’re talking.

Understand the market and its problems.

Create winning products by empowering the development, marketing, and sales teams with personas and their problems.

Create promotions and enablement tools that empower individual salespeople and deliver better products to customers.

Build products that customers want to buy.

Product management defined

Product management listens to the market to turn product ideas into business results. After all, anyone can have an idea; the challenge is figuring out the tedious details that turn an idea into a successful business.

Product management does a lot of research, analysis, and validation—work that is often hidden from other teams.


A business-savvy product manager answers these questions:

- What markets should we serve?
- What markets and businesses should we avoid?
- Which types of customers (personas)

will benefit from what we build?

- Which features and capabilities are most important for our market?
- What are our business goals and what product decisions are necessary to achieve them?

And product management extends beyond product creation to delivery—how we sell, service, and support the product.



What if we found ourselves building something that nobody wanted? In that case, what did it matter if we did it on time and on budget?



Eric Ries, Lean Startup

To those who have seen the impact of strong product management on an organization, asking, “Who needs product management?” is like asking, “Who needs profit?”

Consider product management the “one source of truth”—one place for answers and one person to take ultimate responsibility. The product manager serves as a clearinghouse for product and feature ideas.

The strategic role of product management is to be the messenger of the market, delivering information to the departments that need market facts to make decisions. This is why it is unsurprising that product management teams often report directly to the CEO, acting as their representative at the product level.

Companies that do not see the value of product management undergo a series of expansions and layoffs. They hire and fire and hire and fire the product

management group. These companies often experience a similar roller-coaster ride in revenue and profit.

However, over the years, we have seen evidence that product management is a role that can even out the ups and downs and help move a company to the next level of performance.

To those who have seen the impact of strong product management on an organization, asking, “Who needs product management?” is like asking, “Who needs profit?”

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Product management is a **force multiplier**. The work of one is a lever that empowers multiple team members.

Product management empowers Development, Marketing, Sales, and Support teams with market and product insights.



It's simple really: product management ensures you build the product right and build the right product.



The history of product management

In the early 1980s, most companies had an unambiguous job description for those who performed business planning for a single product. The title: product manager.

Now jump to the late 1980s. In his seminal tech marketing book *Crossing the Chasm*, Geoffrey Moore recommended two separate product management titles:

- A product manager is responsible for ensuring that a product gets created, tested, and shipped on schedule and meeting specifications. It is a highly internally-focused job, bridging the marketing and development organizations and requiring a high degree of technical competence and project management experience.
- A product marketing manager is responsible for bringing the product to the marketplace and to the distribution organization. It is a highly externally-focused job.

In 1995, Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland formalized the Scrum development methodology. And with it came yet another product management role: product owner.

- The Product Owner represents the stakeholders and is the voice of the customer. He or she is accountable for ensuring that the team delivers value to the business. Scrum teams should have one Product Owner.

The challenge here is twofold: the product owner role is what developers want from a product manager—without regard to what other departments need. And few product owners are empowered to be “the voice of the customer.”

Too many product managers report they have never spoken to a customer. And they're not even allowed to.

As a result, they don't really understand customer feature requests. When they don't know the market or its problems, they find it impossible to prioritize features and capabilities.

The key to successful product management is a deep understanding of markets and their problems, coupled with skills in planning and prioritizing for business value.

In recent years, I've seen product management teams pulled increasingly into the technical aspects of the product, serving more as development managers and designers than product managers—and neglecting both business strategy and go-to-market responsibilities.

When organizations implemented agile development methods, formerly business-focused product managers became technology-focused product owners. Nowadays, we often see product marketing managers filling the strategic void left when traditional product managers become technical product owners. Worse, many companies don't have anyone making strategic product decisions.

Of course, product management can't claim product success due to their efforts alone. Products don't succeed because of product management or development or marketing or sales. They succeed when these departments work in alignment.

As they say, "Success has many parents; failure is an orphan."

Success has many parents; failure is an orphan.

Here's a handy way to think about roles.

In a well-run organization, each role has a single orientation; they either support individual customers or they support the market.

Some company roles, such as sales and customer support teams, focus on customers one at a time. Marketing, development, and product management teams engage with a market—in other words, many or all customers at one time.

Visiting a customer with a sales or support objective isn't product management; that's selling and support.

Interviewing and observing customers to understand their workflows and buying journeys is product management, as we use the information to understand the needs of a market, not just the needs of a single customer.



Only 21% of organizations report that roles in product management are clearly defined and understood.

The goal of product management is to turn good ideas into successful businesses systematically.





HOW AGILE CREATED ROLE CHAOS

How agile created role chaos

Agile methodologies have reshaped the landscape of product management, promising more flexibility, faster time-to-market, and better alignment with customer needs. Yet, for many organizations, the reality has been starkly different.

I interviewed over 100 heads of product for my book, *Turn Ideas Into Products*, and their feedback was eye-opening: while 50% praised agile for its benefits, the other 50% called it a disaster.

The root cause?

Turning product managers into product owners.



The disaster: Product managers become product owners

When organizations assigned product managers to the product owner role, they didn't just change a title—they changed the focus of the job. Product managers, who were once strategic leaders, became tactical executors, often bogged down by tasks that pulled them away from their core responsibilities.

When explaining the importance of market and customer expertise, I have heard from far too many product owners that they have never, not once, talked with a customer. You simply cannot drive strategic product outcomes in this scenario.

This shift to the tactical caused significant problems.

Strategic Drift. Product managers lost their strategic focus, leading to products that were well-executed but poorly aligned with market needs.

Absent Market Facts. Without statistically relevant feedback from the market and customers, we returned to the failed feature-factory approach, where opinions drove priorities, and we built things because we could. (“I talked to a guy” is not a valid research study.)

Role Confusion. Teams were unclear about who was responsible for what, leading to inefficiencies and missed opportunities.

Burnout. Product managers became overwhelmed with the sheer volume of tasks that fell outside their expertise, leading to burnout and turnover.

The Agile Manifesto isn't to blame

It's important to clarify that the Agile Manifesto isn't the culprit here. Agile, in theory, is sound—its principles of empowerment, collaboration, customer focus, and adaptability are as relevant today as they were when the manifesto was first written.

The issue lies in how agile methods have been implemented in many organizations.

The transition of roles—turning product managers into product owners or simply removing product professionals entirely—has often been poorly handled, leading to confusion and inefficiency.

Many organizations found success with agile methods by turning business analysts into product owners. Business analysts are already accustomed to working closely with development teams, refining requirements, and managing backlogs. This made the transition smoother and more effective, as they were able to take on the product owner role without losing focus on their core responsibilities.

The Agile Manifesto (2001)

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.

Through this work we have come to value:

- **Individuals and interactions** over *processes and tools*
- **Working software** over *comprehensive documentation*
- **Customer collaboration** over *contract negotiation*
- **Responding to change** over *following a plan*

That is, while there is value in the *items on the right*, we value the **items on the left** more.

<https://agilemanifesto.org>

4

QUARTZ: A PRODUCT PLANNING METHODOLOGY



Quartz: a product planning methodology

Just as agile methods have optimized software development projects, you need a process to guide plans and decisions before, during, and after development—a framework to build the right product and successfully introduce it to the market.

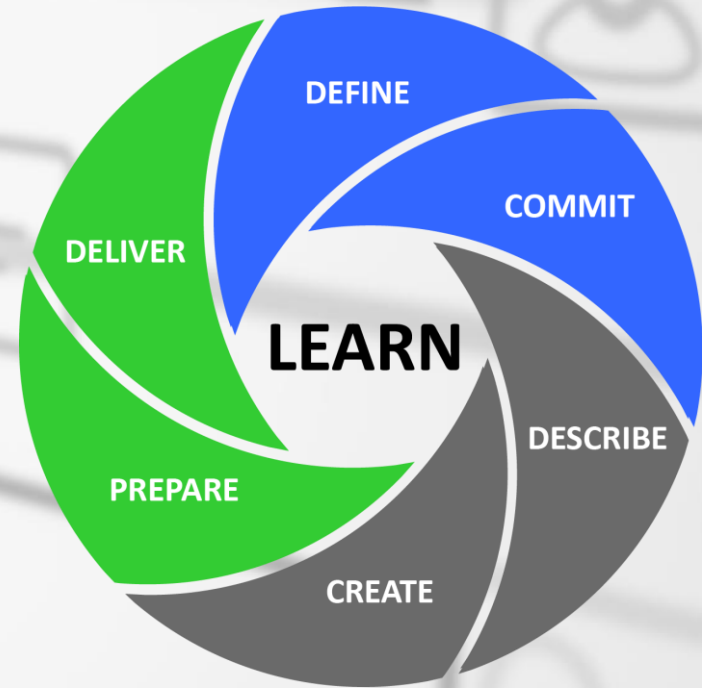
The Quartz Open Framework provides a logical process from idea to market, supported by continual learning.

The Quartz Open Framework defines six phases of product management: from defining problems to solve through

describing those problems to both the technical and customer-facing teams to delivering the product to market with effective launch and go-to-market strategies.

Each phase requires one or more of the key artifacts—but only you can determine exactly what information you need for each step.

The Quartz Open Framework has guided hundreds of companies to implement a simple idea-to-market process.



Quartz and the product management triad

The product management triad comprises three complementary roles: product strategy, product planning, and product growth.

Product strategy managers are typically senior business leaders, such as VP or director-level product leaders or Principal Product Managers. They have business skills and explore new markets for existing products and new products for existing markets. They evaluate metrics to determine which products need additional investment and which need to be retired.

Product planning managers work closely with designers and developers to solve a specific problem. They often have titles of Product Manager or Technical Product

Manager. Their primary tools are personas, stories, and backlogs. These product professionals develop a deep understanding of the product and its technical capabilities; they achieve this by working with the product, by discussing it with customers and colleagues, and by keeping current on the industry. For a product planning manager, the product almost becomes their personal hobby.

Product growth managers, usually called Product Marketing Managers, are focused on markets, either vertical or geographic. The product growth manager focuses on sales enablement and go-to-market planning so that when the product is delivered, there are people who want to

buy it. They use their market expertise to empower product management, marketing, and sales with the requirements and language of their markets, and they serve as the chief liaison from the market to the company.

Product professionals in the triad focus on identifying, articulating, and prioritizing customer problems. They evaluate areas of friction for those who buy and use the product and then work with solutions teams, such as development and marketing, to solve those problems.

The product management triad embraces the specialized roles that have evolved because it's so difficult to find one person with all three skill sets.

Quartz and the product management triad

Product Strategy

Focuses on long-term vision and market position

Evaluates new markets and product opportunities.

Aligns product strategy with overall business objectives

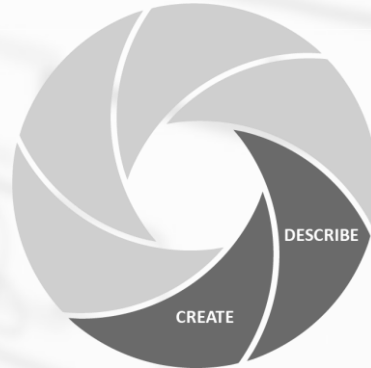


Product Planning

Prioritizes features and manages product roadmaps.

Works closely with design and development teams.

Translates customer needs into detailed product requirements.



Product Growth

Drives go-to-market strategies and sales enablement.

Monitors product performance and customer feedback post-launch.

Identifies opportunities for product expansion and improvement.





RECLAIMING PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Reclaiming strategic focus in product management

To maximize the impact of product management, organizations must actively work to reclaim and reinforce their strategic focus.

Analyze product-related activities

The first step in reclaiming the product manager's role is to conduct a thorough analysis of all product-related activities. Identify which tasks are genuinely part of product management and which are not. This clarity will help you reassign responsibilities more effectively.

Assign responsibilities to the correct teams

Once you've identified the different activities, assign them to the appropriate teams. Solution design and story mapping,

for example, would be better handled by UX designers or solution architects. Backlog management could be led by business analysts or dedicated project managers.

Empower solutions teams with product and market context

Finally, empowering your solution teams with the right product and market context is crucial. This ensures they can make informed decisions without needing constant input from the product manager. The product managers can then focus on their proper role: identifying market opportunities, crafting product strategy, and ensuring alignment with business goals.

Foster cross-functional collaboration

Promote effective communication and cooperation between product management and other departments, such as development, marketing, sales, and customer support.

• • •

By recognizing the implementation mistakes—particularly the misalignment of roles—you can return product managers to their rightful place as strategic leaders. This shift will improve your teams' effectiveness and morale and ensure your products align better with market needs and business goals.

Final thoughts . . .

Product management is a strategic role. Yet as experts of the product and the market, product managers are often pulled into tactical activities. But just because the product manager is an expert in the product doesn't mean no one else needs product expertise.

Many product managers are so busy supporting other departments that they have little or no time for actual product management.

Product managers bring a powerful combination of skills: product and technology expertise combined with market and domain knowledge as well as business savvy.

Developers know **what can be built**; product managers know **whether it should be built**.

Marketing people know **how to communicate**; product managers know **what to communicate**.

Salespeople know what **one customer** wants to buy; product managers must determine what a **market full of customers** will buy.

Product management is a strategic role focused on what products and markets we can serve in the years to come. Product managers are the architects of product success, balancing customer needs, business goals, and technical capabilities.

Product managers systematically turn good ideas into successful products.

About the author

Steve is CEO and cofounder of Product Growth Leaders. An author, speaker, and product coach, he uses modern methods to help product organizations move products from ideas to market.

Prior to founding Product Growth Leaders, Steve was Vice President at Pragmatic Institute where he holds the distinction of Certified Product Master. He was also one of the original architects of the Quartz Open Framework, a non-proprietary framework for product management that is free to use and share.

Steve has been a long-time advocate for product management, serving as an executive and advisor to many technical product organizations and industry associations. In 2020, Steve was awarded one of only ten "51331" coins for contributing to the best practices of product management.



Other books by Steve Johnson

Turn Ideas Into Products: Managing Products using the Quartz Open Framework (2024)

Look Beyond the Product: The Business of Agile Product Management (2014)

Living in an Agile World: The Role of Product Management When Development Goes Agile (2009)

The Strategic Role of Product Management (2008)

Roles and Skills

Improve the productivity of your organization with clear roles and responsibilities.

[Read more](#)

Product Growth Leaders can guide you to examine roles, responsibilities, and key deliverables in each step of product planning — from idea to market, from business planning to release planning to launch planning.

Our team has helped hundreds of organizations and product leaders turn chaos into clarity — clarity in the product strategy, product roles and responsibilities, and the methods for doing the work with a standard playbook.

[Get started today](#)



Product **Growth** Leaders