

The Product Manager's Toolkit

Gabriel Steinhardt

The Product Manager's Toolkit

Methodologies, Processes and Tasks in
High-Tech Product Management

 Springer

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Foreword

Product management in the high-tech industry has always experienced varied interpretation as to its character and internal structure. Often product management is performed informally or in a non-standardized form, and organized differently in each company – commonly located in the marketing department or sometimes in the engineering department. In addition, although the product management profession has existed for many years, there has not been a product management best-practice or standard that has been globally adopted. This book offers a holistic methodology as a solution to these concerns.

Product management is a discipline responsible for product planning (articulating the market problem) and product marketing (generating awareness, differentiation, and demand). Companies have come to appreciate the organizational value of other well-defined professional disciplines, such as project management, quality management, and business analysis as well as the results achieved by the orderly implementation of these disciplines. Accordingly, standardized product management done consistently well can greatly increase the probability of product success and profitability.

Product management practitioners frequently perform a broad spectrum of roles with varying responsibilities and skill sets, and communicate with both internal and external stakeholders like sales, marketing communications, engineering, customer support, customers, partners, and suppliers. Identifying the various roles and responsibilities in the product management domain is imperative to understand what needs to be accomplished in order to deliver a successful product. Product management is not a role performed in the interest of one or more product lines; it is a distributed set of roles and related responsibilities covering definitive aspects of the product delivery process.

Defining roles and responsibilities in product management is a very preliminary step. One also needs to understand how to do what needs to be done – creating deliverables that can be successfully used in the delivery of a product. In addition, a repeatable process that creates successful products needs to be documented, followed, audited, and improved upon. The product management models and templates in this book are intended to help facilitate the implementation of that process.

For over seven years I have assisted Gabriel Steinhardt in his development of the Blackblot product management body of knowledge, including the “Blackblot Product Manager’s Toolkit™” (PMTK). I have met few people as dedicated to defining and standardizing the product management profession as Gabriel Steinhardt, who has made it his professional goal. The primary purpose of the PMTK methodology is to help companies and their product management teams become more successful in their product delivery efforts. With the release of this book it is hoped that product management will mature further and be viewed as a structured and well-defined critical business function.

This book will help students of product management, product management practitioners, product management organizations, and corporations understand the value of product management and the distinct roles and responsibilities in product management. It will aid in the efforts to clarify role definitions, identify responsibilities, define processes and deliverables, and improve the ability to communicate with stakeholders.

Daniel Stadler
Business Consultant, MBA/Technology Management

About the Author

Gabriel Steinhardt is Blackblot’s Managing Director, a recognized international high-tech product management expert, author, lecturer, and developer of practical tools and methodologies that increase product managers’ productivity.

A marketing and information systems MBA with over a decade of experience in product management in the computer software and hardware industry, Gabriel has assumed diverse leadership roles with major corporations and start-ups in marketing, product management, and technical undertakings.

Gabriel created the highly successful “Blackblot Product Manager’s Toolkit™” (PMTK) professional template collection, designed Blackblot’s entire product management training program, and wrote the “Blackblot Product Management Professional™” (BPMP) certification program.

Acknowledgments

I have been developing the Blackblot product management body of knowledge, including the “Blackblot Product Manager’s Toolkit™” (PMTK) professional template collection, for over fifteen years. Without the help and support of some very special people, my work and this book would have never become a reality.

Daniel Stadler, a product management expert and technology business advisor, has been providing me with insight, suggestions, critical review, commentary, advice, guidance, and support for several years during the development of PMTK and Blackblot’s product management training and certification programs. A special note of gratitude is extended to him for his invaluable contribution.

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Gabriel Steinhardt

Introduction

Product management is an occupational domain which holds two professional disciplines: product planning and product marketing. This is because product functionality is built for the user via product planning and the product's value is presented to the buyer via product marketing. A somewhat more expanded interpretation would be to view product management as an occupational domain that is based on general management techniques which are focused on product planning and product marketing topics.

A high-tech company is a business entity that either develops technology that is incorporated in a product or is used in the assembly or manufacturing of a product, or manufactures a product that contains technology and that same product relies on that technology to perform its core function. In reality, most high-tech companies view product management as a collective term which describes the broad sum of diverse product related activities, excluding sales and development activities, which are performed in the interest of delivering a particular product to market. With such a vague and misleading definition it is possible to fit most anything (even product testing) into the realm of product management.

This commonly used vague definition of product management misleads and allows many people to place their own personal interpretation on the role of product management, and that accounts for the multitude of diverse definitions in the high-tech industry. Every company is different and handles product management differently – meaning that the product management discipline is not standardized as much as it could be across the high-tech industry. Further complicating the situation is that in each company there are individual stakeholders who often view and interpret product management very differently from each other.

For companies to be recurrently successful, other than just being lucky, a consistent understanding of product management must be present in the company and all aspects of product management must be fully addressed and handled efficiently. However, the contributing factors to both failure and success can be extremely complex to analyze. One can attempt to investigate why certain companies and products have failed, only to quickly realize that the cause is multifaceted and that many factors need to be considered.

Product management is comprised of activities that profoundly impact a product's chances of success. For example, providing incorrect market requirements, erroneous pricing, or an inaccurate profiling of the target market can all be detrimental and critical. If just one of these aspects of product management is amiss, then the product's chances of success are greatly diminished. Therefore, in order to succeed a company must execute all fundamental tasks and follow all key processes in product management. Even though there is still a chance of failure, the probability of success is increased if a company implements and consistently follows a complete product management methodology.

Companies with formal and well-defined product management practices are companies which realize that product management is a core strategic function to the organization. These companies also realize that there is greater importance in making sure that management processes are sound, properly staffed, and implemented.

Some products are successful because of external factors, timing, or merely good fortune. Not all successful products have had great product management behind them, but it is clear that many product failures have had poor or no guidance from product management. Companies will be more successful for each dollar they invest in product development if they improve in the area of product management. The obvious conclusion is that combining a definitive product management methodology with disciplined technology development practices is the key to commercial success in the high-tech world.

The product management profession and the related body of knowledge have reached a greater level of maturity and acceptance in the high-tech industry. However, across the high-tech industry drastically different duties and responsibilities are attributed to product management professionals. Diverse interpretations regarding the role of product management practitioners have only confused and stifled the ability to develop clear and consistent product management methodologies. This book provides a consistent and holistic managerial approach to product management and is based on Blackblot's applicable work models and practical methodology that covers nearly all aspects of product management.

This book, a companion to Blackblot's comprehensive product management training and certification programs, includes the "Blackblot Product Manager's Toolkit™" (PMTK) professional template collection and offers companies and product management professionals with a practical primer for implementing an efficient product management practice in order to increase the practitioner's workplace productivity and improve a product's chances for commercial success.

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Part I
Product Management Concepts

Chapter 1

Who's Driving Your Company?

Examination of Common Product Delivery Strategies

1.1 Introduction

Every company claims it wants to deliver value to its customers, be profitable, and establish leadership in its core markets. Such assertions seem only natural and one would expect to be presented with a corresponding corporate strategy that supports such goals. However, closer inspection reveals that many companies often employ product delivery strategies that lead these companies far away from their business objectives.

Delivering products is a process that begins with a combination of innovation, technology, and market sensing. Each of these driving elements contribute to the initial product concept and its development, but over time and depending on the company, some driving elements will demonstrate a stronger and more lasting impact on the product concept and its roadmap. This is not necessarily due to merit or market forces, but more commonly is an outcome of the corporate culture and business perspectives which dominate the company.

Certain corporate functions that embody the aforementioned driving elements take charge of directing the company's overall product delivery strategy. For example, in one U.S. software firm, a business unit manager noted: *"Marketing has had a relatively limited role in the past; technology is what has driven this company. We're a technology-oriented firm."* In contrast, in a U.S. packaged-goods firm, a marketing manager said: *"Engineering has absolutely no sense of the consumer. They're a group of educated technology scientists who can do amazing things, but they need focus."*

Corporate business goals and wants are relatively similar across diverse industries, but the methods they use to reach their goals vary greatly. This chapter explores these different approaches to product delivery strategies, known as technology-driven, sales-driven, and market-driven.

1.2 Technology-Driven: Take My Road

Some companies believe they know what is best for the customer. They operate under the notion that they can develop technology, design products based on that technology, and have entire markets buy their products because they are *technologically superior*. These technology-driven companies, whose product delivery strategy is determined by their engineering departments, often create products without thoroughly researching the market and without fully understanding the prevailing market requirements.

This sounds somewhat detached from end-user needs, and may very well be so, but a technology-driven approach has its advantages. It enables a company to rapidly deliver products to market since it skims and skips lengthy traditional market research, and consequently bases product design decisions on internal company expertise.

An example of a company who chose to strive forward with a plan to launch a new product in the market without having conducted market-research first is that of Sir Clive Sinclair, a British entrepreneur who was also a brilliant engineer and consummate salesman. Sinclair trusted his intuition for all his product decisions. At the time, he believed that the moment had arrived where the general public was sufficiently interested in electronic wizardry to provide for a completely new market of inexpensive and relatively simple-to-use computers. Without conducting any market research whatsoever, in 1980 he ordered 100,000 sets of parts so he could launch at high-volume his new ZX80 computer. By 1982, Sinclair's company revenue was £30 million, compared with £4.65 million the previous year.

Sinclair and his engineers had intuitively succeeded in assessing the combined potential of technological developments and changing consumer needs, as opposed to researching the market potential for an innovative product. Sinclair's business decisions proved enormously successful, yet very fortuitous.

Technology-driven products are often advanced and therefore appeal to early adopters and niche markets who seek the latest technological developments. Additionally, technology-driven products may also become a high-risk/high-reward venue to be favored by speculative investors. Such products await a triggering event that causes a dramatic surge in demand. Those events may range from the hypothetical (for example, future governmental legislation that would promote vehicles with fuel cell engines) to the actual sales of survival gear when people were confronted with the specters of Y2K (year 2000 computer bug) or the tremendous demand for security equipment post 9/11 [September 11, 2001]. Nevertheless this is the problem with being technology-driven; it is a risky approach to delivering products. Adopting a technology-driven posture has, over time, proven low growth potential due to the failure to implement proper marketing activities and because of the isolated manner in which products are managed. Many technology-driven products are characterized by having complex features or unnecessary features, and some technology-driven products are realistically unneeded.

At the 2004 Consumer Electronics Show (CES) in Las Vegas, Nevada, Gerard Kleisterlee, the CEO of Philips, quoted data from a Yankee Group survey:

“Thirty percent of all recently introduced home networking products sold today were returned to the store because the consumer could not get them to work, and forty eight percent of potential digital camera owners were delaying their purchase because they perceived the products to be too complicated.”

The conclusion is quite obvious. Although some may succeed with a technology-driven approach to product management and development, there is a bigger chance that driving the best technology to customers will not yield a prosperous outcome. This is simply because the company and its product are focused on providing better technology and not focused on closely matching customer needs and abilities with that technology.

1.3 Sales-Driven: A Cruising Taxi

A technology-driven company is focused on its technology and a sales-driven company is focused on maximizing short-term return on investment. Accordingly, the prime responsibility of most corporate departments in a sales-driven company is to help the sales channels with knowledge, ways to sell, and sales support.

Like a taxi driver cruising city streets looking for passengers who are heading to different locations, sales-driven companies cruise their markets seeking deals with customers who very often have different needs. Such as with the proverbial taxi driver who will deviate out of his way to accommodate the passenger going in the opposite direction, so will these companies alter their product’s feature set in order to accommodate the particular wishes of a specific customer.

There is nothing fundamentally wrong with being sales-driven and providing custom work. Generations of tailors have sewn fitted clothes to people of different shapes and sizes, and scores of taxi drivers worldwide transport passengers to their varied destinations.

The advantage of being sales-driven is less risk because there are always unique business opportunities and individual needs to satisfy. A sales-driven product strategy can be a lifesaver and used as a survival mode tactic if market segments start deteriorating or are in a chaotic phase which precludes targeted marketing programs. The downside is that a sales-driven product strategy is a short-term approach that does not build highly-sustainable product lines. Without those sustainable product lines it is very hard to build market leadership and promote company growth.

The eventual outcome of a sales-driven approach in high-tech companies is a plethora of product variants (produced via modification of core products) which are sold to different customers. These product variants are full of highly-individualized custom features that are developed, tested, documented, and supported. This situation invariably leads to resource duplication, wasted effort, loss of distinctive competence, and great difficulty in implementing product roadmaps.

Due to market dynamics, the majority of sales-driven companies struggle in the long run because there is nothing much to differentiate them from the competition, other than price which becomes their primary marketing tool.

1.4 Market-Driven: Driven to Success

To gain a status of being market-driven, a company has to engage its customers and listen to their needs. It is all a matter of timing since asking customers what they want during the sales process is not considered actually listening to the market. Being market-driven requires a proactive product management process; engaging customers before the product is planned, defined, designed and developed.

Only by taking a long hard look at end-markets and paying attention to customers' demands, before proceeding to develop a technology platform or products, can a company be regarded as one that employs a market-driven approach to product management and development.

A case of sales-driven culture posing as market-driven happened to Big Blue. IBM[®] was the dominant force in the technology industry and synonymous with innovation and cutting-edge technology. IBM achieved its leadership position through a market-driven approach by using its massive sales force to determine customer needs. However, the company ran into trouble when it stopped listening for needs and began telling customers about its latest new product or technology.

Applying a market-driven approach demands commitment and discipline as it is a very procedural approach. Companies with an informal work culture and loose organizational structures fail at applying this methodology and so do companies eager to rush into the market because of the lengthy time involved in executing all phases of the market-driven process. But when a market-driven approach is properly applied, the result is a product that will solve a pervasive market problem in an established market segment, and for which customers are willing to pay. Experience has shown that rewards do come for those who patiently follow the course.

Market-driven companies produce sustainable products with visibly notable targeted value. The biggest reward is that a market-driven product helps establish market leadership and revenue-growth potential.

1.5 Summary

A study conducted several years ago by querying top marketing executives working at one-hundred leading U.S. technology companies, showed that despite all the talk about being market-driven and customer-focused, 54% of respondents viewed their company as actually being technology-driven. Companies do understand which approach they should follow and publicly declare it, but indeed it is hard to mend ways and transition because becoming market-driven will demand a painful shift in corporate culture and business practices.

For those who take the path, success is lasting. In the high-tech world (e.g. Microsoft[®]) and consumer goods industry (e.g. Procter & Gamble), a leadership position can be established and maintained by being a very effective

market-driven organization that has superior skills in understanding, attracting, and keeping valuable customers with products that deliver real value. This is not just a cliché but a formula for success.

What ultimately prevails in companies is the understanding that product value is always determined by the customer, not by the company or its technology. This understanding in turn leads to the realization that developing technology that solves known market problems is better and more profitable than trying to discover markets that could possibly use an existing and newly developed technology.

Chapter 2

Product Management Team

Formalizing and Structuring the Responsibilities and Makeup of the Product Management Team

2.1 Introduction

The role of a product manager is challenging, complex, and often misunderstood. Across the high-tech industry, the product manager title is used in many ways to describe drastically different duties and responsibilities. Diverse interpretations regarding the role of the product manager have created for some an untenable situation where they struggle to define their own role.

Properly defining and structuring the roles and responsibilities of the product management team will enable the team members to be more efficient and productive; leading to better revenues and higher-quality products that meet customer needs.

This chapter explores the challenges faced by modern high-tech product managers and proposes a solution to formalize and structure the responsibilities and makeup of the product management team.

2.2 Your Role

Job titles are important and the role one plays in an organization is often identified by one's job title. In most cases, job titles allow an observer to construe the role and scope of responsibilities associated with a specific job title, but often this is not the case when it comes to the world of product management. The myriad of interpretations and diversity that surround product management job titles, especially the product manager title, make it very difficult to ascertain which roles and responsibilities are associated with a specific product management job title.

Ask several product managers what their responsibilities are and you will get a variety of answers and descriptions. This situation can reach a point where several product managers working at the same company and department provide very different perspectives on their position.

Many people mistakenly accept a definition that presumes that product management is a collective term used to describe the broad sum of diverse activities performed in the interest of delivering a particular product to market. Such a broad definition, used by many companies today, is the root cause of much grief and problems because it lacks the professional focus needed to be successful, and allows virtually any product-related task to be assigned to the product manager.

2.3 Jack of All Roles, Master of None

It is challenging for humans to multitask activities, and that is why people prefer to focus on a sole task or sequentially perform a few select tasks. The inherent difficulty of multitasking hinges principally on humans' limited ability to maintain a high level of cerebral focus when confronted with a multitude of dynamically changing issues. To a lesser degree, fatigue and lack of resources (primarily time) are also contributing factors to multitasking hardships.

According to the prevailing (yet erroneous) definition of product management as outlined earlier, it is clear that the nature of performing product management activities is the epitome of multitasking diverse tasks. Multitasking product management assignments is particularly challenging because it requires a multitude of complimentary or differential skills. In addition, the multitasking of these assignments becomes profoundly more complex when product managers have several products to manage.

Such a broad colloquial definition of the product management profession is the result of individual and industry interpretations. These free interpretations invariably led to the ever-familiar challenges that the majority of product managers encounter daily. These challenges can be caused by a combination of the following: ambiguous role definition, imbalanced relationships with other departments, overlapping responsibilities, an overwhelming volume of activities, a lack of processes, poorly defined processes, no definitive methodology, and a shortage of uniform work tools in the profession.

The overall perceived obstacle the typical product manager encounters is the permeating lack of professional focus. One can be adequate at many things but it is difficult to excel at many. This is the reason many product managers view themselves as trapped in a never-ending juggling routine. Having too many tasks to juggle eventually leads to tasks being dropped and the outcome is poor overall performance by the product manager, which is not beneficial for the company.

Ostensibly, the title of product manager has proven itself more harmful than helpful. Other official and unofficial product management title variations, such as product CEO or product champion or product executive, have failed because they are often accompanied by a blurred and wide-scoped job description that describes or implies the product manager being the owner and as a result, responsible for the commercial success of the product. Being labeled or treated as a product CEO can

be a daunting situation, since it nearly always means operating without the authority and resources available to a corporate CEO.

When a job title has an overly broad set of diverse activities (roles and responsibilities) associated with it, there is a high probability that performing to the expectations of that job title will result in failure. Obviously a semantic change is needed and this change is based on the well-known fact that being professional means being focused on a particular domain or discipline.

2.4 Breaking It Down

The two main disciplines that reside in the product management domain are product planning and product marketing. Product planning and product marketing are very different but due to the collaborative nature of these two disciplines, some companies erroneously perceive them as being one discipline, which they call product management. Done carefully, it is very possible to functionally divide the majority of activities within the product management domain into two distinct disciplines (functions), product planning and product marketing, and yet retain the required synergy between those two disciplines.

Accordingly, product management is correctly defined as an occupational domain which contains two professional disciplines: product planning and product marketing. A slightly more expanded definition is that product management is an occupational domain that is based on general management techniques that are focused on product planning and product marketing activities. The product planning and product marketing disciplines focus on the users' and buyers' needs. Therefore, the product management domain resides solely in the "Problem Space", and the engineering domain resides in the "Solution Space".

Product planning is the ongoing process of identifying and articulating market requirements that define a product's feature set. Product marketing is an outbound activity aimed at generating product awareness, differentiation, and demand. Product planning and product marketing are different and distinct professional disciplines because they foster different roles and different quality goals.

With these understandings in mind, it is easy to address the respective tasks of product planning and product marketing as belonging to the roles of a product planner and a product marketer. Whether these two roles are handled by two individuals or performed by one person is irrelevant. Indeed there are cases where one person, or two people sitting in one room, or different departments that collaborate; assume both disciplines. The point is that there is now a clear and unambiguous link between the job title and the job responsibilities.

It should also be clear that the disciplines of product planning and product marketing are inextricably linked because companies design product functionality for the user and market the product's value to the buyer. To clarify this point, an intuitive example of this supposition is a child's toy. The parent is the buyer and is interested that the toy is safe to use, will help the child grow smarter, keep the child

occupied, and be reasonably priced. Product value is therefore marketed to the buyer, the parent. The child only cares about product functionality such as: is the toy fun and engaging, visually pleasing, and will it do what he/she wants. The toy's functionality is designed for the user, the child, and not for the buyer. The same approach is taken with high-tech products where buyers are often not the users, and this approach means distinct product management roles that separately analyze and address buyer and user needs.

The recent fast-paced growth of high-tech industries and shifting interpretations of product management have created skewed responsibility sets for product managers. The already problematic broad definition of product management was further complicated when tactical activities were added to a product manager's job definition.

Tactical activities are assignments, usually self-contained and specific, that fulfill short-term business needs, such as delivering a presentation, writing collateral material, or assisting a salesperson. Such assignments are time consuming and demand a disproportionate allocation of individual resources (mental focus, time and physical effort), relative to their overall importance. By monopolizing the scope of work, tactical activities detract from product managers' ability to fulfill their assigned strategic responsibilities.

A strategic mission is one that aims to establish and plan the overall and long-term course of action a company should engage in to achieve corporate objectives. The strategic mission for the product marketer would primarily involve evaluating market opportunities and writing market plans that address these market opportunities. For the product planner, it is identifying market needs to deliver winning products that help a company become a market leader, market follower, or an innovator.

2.5 Roles and Goals

Executive managers have very clear work goals that primarily center on achieving corporate profitability. Software developers, for example, also know what they aim for, and that usually is generating a lean and efficient programming code.

However, many product managers provide widely different answers when asked to convey the goal(s) of their job. They often find it quite difficult to provide a definitive answer, with this situation obviously stemming from an overly broad and task-oriented (not goal-oriented) job description. By breaking down the product management domain to its disciplines, it becomes feasible to clearly define the roles and goals of each discipline.

The product planner determines and defines product functionality by virtue of writing the market requirements, and therefore the prime goal is to have product buyers and users who are satisfied with the product. This satisfaction level means contentment with the product's ability to solve business or consumer problems and

satisfy needs, and being satisfied with the non-tangible aspects of product ownership such as service, price, warranty, status, or prestige.

The product marketer’s goal is to have a satisfied sales force. This goal is somewhat indirect to the marketing actions being performed, but is an excellent predictor of how effective the product marketer’s actions are in generating awareness, differentiation, and demand for the product. Salespeople have a relatively easy job when product marketers perform their roles well. The market environment, created by the actions of the product marketer, leads to a very favorable situation where the market buys the product as opposed to the salespeople actively selling the product.

Salespeople are very happy when *the product sells itself*, which really means that the sales cycle is minimal or reduced because of quality marketing actions initiated by product marketers. In short, product planning’s quality goal is satisfied customers; product marketing’s quality goal is a satisfied sales force.

After defining the strategic roles of the key disciplines within the product management domain, there is a need for a cooperative scheme, a team concept, to maximize the effectiveness of these strategic roles through collaboration, and complement them with outbound tactical support functions. Product management is not accomplished successfully by one person, but by a product management team who fulfill various roles and functions.

2.6 Blackblot Product Management Team Model

The product management team is a task group, comprised of four distinct roles, which organizationally reside in the product management department. The four roles in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model” are the product planner, product marketer, sales engineer, and marketing communications (MarCom) manager. These four roles are the basic providers of the planning, deliverables, and actions that guide the inbound oriented product definition and the outbound marketing efforts (Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1 Blackblot Product Management Team Model

The primary responsibility of the product planner is to constantly research the market and identify market needs, which are later translated into market requirements that in turn will foster new products or new features to existing products. The product planner prepares the documents that profoundly impact the product's success. These documents include the "Market Requirements Document" (MRD), product use cases, product roadmap, and the pricing model.

The primary responsibility of the product marketer is to analyze product oriented business opportunities, formulate plans that evaluate those business opportunities, and plan and guide the subsequent marketing efforts. For example, the product marketer prepares the product business case and following approval, writes the market plan.

The sales engineer is primarily responsible for outbound product-centric activities, such as pre-sale support and product demonstrations. Sales engineers, relying on their technical skills, help customers understand how the product delivers the necessary value and functionality that address the customers' business or consumer problem.

The sales engineer's other objective is to provide critical input to product planners on customer needs and problems. Sales engineers often operate under titles such as product evangelist, technical evangelist, technical sales support, pre-sale engineer, outbound product manager, or technical product manager; yet regardless of the title they all perform a relatively similar set of tasks.

The MarCom manager is primarily responsible for creating interest and memorable presence through the conception and copywriting of all collateral material, advertising, direct response mail, web, and other types of communications media. This person is also tasked with maintaining a consistent image and positioning in the target market, according to messages and directives provided by the product marketer.

The product management team is managed by the director of products or vice president of product management who provides overall product vision, product and market strategies, and team leadership. Other titles are sometimes used to designate this leadership position, such as director of product management or Chief Products Officer (CPO), in order to indicate the encompassing nature of this role. This position is responsible for balancing corporate goals with long-term market trends and opportunities, and for directing, establishing, maintaining, and planning the overall policies and strategies for the product management department. The director of products role creates and manages the overall product management process and oversees its effective execution (Table 2.1).

2.7 Odd Couple(s)

In startup companies it is common to see one individual assume all four roles listed in the "Blackblot Product Management Team Model". That person will do market planning, deliver product demonstrations, formulate market requirements, and write collateral material.

Table 2.1 Blackblot Product Management Team Model (Summary Table)

Role	Responsibility	Goal	Expertise
Product planner (strategic role)	Identify and articulate market requirements	Satisfied product buyers and users	Market expert
Product marketer (strategic role)	Generate awareness, differentiation and demand	Satisfied sales force	Marketing expert
Sales engineer (tactical role)	Outbound product-centric activities, i.e., pre-sale support and product demos	Customer knowledge of product value and functionality	Advocacy expert
MarCom manager (tactical role)	Conception and copywriting of all collateral material	Consistent image and positioning in the target market	Media expert
Director of products (strategic role)	Balancing corporate goals with long-term market trends and opportunities	Successful formulation and execution of the product and market strategies	Strategy and process expert

It is obvious that product manager is a title assigned to a person who performs a single role or a combination of the four roles listed in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model”. At some point in time, usually as the company grows, the roles are delegated to other individuals who specialize in the role assigned to them. However, for a wide variety of reasons and reasoning, it is quite common to see two roles coupled together in order to define a position that is entrusted to one person.

Frequently the product planner and sales engineer roles are combined into one position in which the person is charged with doing product demonstrations and providing pre-sale support because he/she is also defining the product, and thus has more expertise and in-depth product knowledge than the average salesperson.

Another possibility is the product marketer and MarCom manager combination, where this individual does all tasks that upper management may perceive to be *marketing*. This usually consists of actual market planning, writing copyright, and managing advertising.

A very prevalent situation in high-tech industries, such as the software development industry, is the combining of the product marketer and product planner roles. Corporate job descriptions for open positions that prefer candidates with a technical undergraduate degree and an MBA with an emphasis in marketing are a clear indication that the company views the position as a combination of the two roles.

It does make sense to a certain level to have the product marketer and product planner roles cooperate with each other. Product success hinges on understanding customer behavior and the business aspects of the industry in order to build value into a product. Complementing that ability is in-depth product knowledge, which is used to plan marketing actions that deliver meaningful messages about the product. The problem is that both of these roles (or capabilities) are strategic and demand expertise that can only be achieved by professional focus.

In addition, people come from different educational or professional backgrounds and therefore naturally gravitate toward their comfort zone; eventually causing one of two roles to receive more attention than the other. Under performing, or in the worst case scenario not performing some of the product management team roles, may dramatically impede the product's chances of marketplace success.

2.8 Roles and Activities

Any of the various couplings of roles, as previously outlined, can create workflow obstacles for the following conceptual reasons. Having one person simultaneously perform both strategic and tactical roles and activities, such as with the product marketer and MarCom manager combination, is very inefficient because tactical activities will always monopolize the person's time and demand increasingly more effort. On the other hand, having one individual perform two strategic roles, as with the product marketer and product planner combination, can be equally debilitating since each role demands an acute learning curve and full devotion.

It is acknowledged that the joining of roles is justifiable under a variety of circumstances; such as budget limitations, personnel quotas, company or department formulation, and product complexity. However, role coupling should always be regarded as a temporary or evolutionary measure – not as a permanent arrangement.

2.9 Solution

Product management is an encompassing domain of disciplines. Acknowledging that fact leads to the realization that it is extremely hard and often impossible to specialize and excel at performing all product management tasks. This is because being multi-faceted and multi-disciplined often results in lack of professional focus.

Adding to the situational difficulty is the expansive view of a product manager's job description that leads to product managers being assigned tactical activities, most of which result because others simply do not want to do them. Tactical activities significantly impair the product manager's ability to perform crucial strategic tasks.

In some companies, the product marketing manager and product manager are interchangeable titles as they both relate to the same function and individual. This inconsistency further causes functional problems within companies and across industries.

This problematic reality is not planned and is seldom the result of malicious intent. It is just that some companies believe in the laissez-faire approach where internal politics and forces shape corporate processes, responsibilities, and even the organizational structure. There is some advantage to having role ambiguity because it allows individuals to be proactive and define their role as they want it to be.

People can work within the ambiguity and chart their way to a desired job description. Unfortunately, more often than not, the fast-paced structured world of high-tech is not supportive of this approach because there is just too much inherent ambiguity or variance associated with the title of product manager. Therefore, the solution is to abolish the title product manager from the corporate lexicon and use the clearer, more understandable and uniform titles of product planner and product marketer.

As a result of such action, a different organizational approach is required. Under the charge of the vice president or director of product management, is the corporate product management department that holds product management teams. Each team, whether real or virtual, holds four roles (as described in the “Blackblot Product Management Team Model”) with the intent of having these roles eventually assigned to four separate individuals.

Tactical activities and logistics formerly imposed on the product manager will now go to the program manager or release manager, thus relieving those in product management from the tactical overload they routinely experience. The program manager, a role outside product management, is essentially the project manager for the entire product delivery project, and is tasked with applying a suitable product delivery process that ensures deliverables from all contributing corporate functions. The release manager, also a role outside product management, is responsible for handling all logistical and operational matters that pertain to the delivery of the product.

Properly defining and structuring the roles and responsibilities of the product management team will enable the team members to be more efficient and productive. This most likely will lead to better products, better marketing and higher revenues.

2.10 Summary

Product management is a domain, not a role, which changes and evolves with the organization. It is a multi-faceted and multi-disciplined domain and there will always be a certain level of ambiguity involved with product management, but applying a proper product management team concept and structure, with well-defined roles and responsibilities, can significantly mitigate that ambiguity. This act is crucial whether the company is building or rebuilding the corporate product management function.

As a result of the team restructuring and the redefinition of roles, the newly attained occupational focus helps build professional expertise. The product planner can now devote time and effort to excel as a market expert and problem-teller, whose role is to perform customer advocacy better than everyone else in the company, while backing assertions with quantitative market/customer data. The product marketer is now focused on becoming a marketing expert, perfecting corporate competency in using tools and executing techniques, processes and

tasks that promote winning products in the target market. All this decreases departmental rivalry and allows the engineers to develop their professional expertise as technology experts and problem-solvers.

Doing the right things and doing things right, especially in the early stages of company inception, will help those in product management to professionally grow and contribute fully according to their potential. Undoubtedly, companies will also benefit because now members of the product management team will be able to generate long-term value for their company by focusing more on strategy formulation.

The final deduction is that those involved in product management must be provided with clear job descriptions (roles, responsibilities and goals) as well as focused goals and objectives. All talk and effort can prove quite futile without this basic premise.