TIM HERBIG
Product Management and
Business Leadership

<div align="right">**Tim Herbig <tim@herbig.co>**</div>

How 51 leading tech teams define the Product Manager role
1 message

Hiten Shah <hiten@producthabits.com>   Wed, Jun 5, 2019 at 5:01 PM
Reply-To: Hiten Shah <hiten@producthabits.com>
To: tim@herbigt.com

What are companies actually hiring Product Managers to do? What responsibilities should a PM expect to own? And what product skills are in demand?

We decided to find out.

We analyzed 51 job postings from tech companies in Silicon Valley. Companies ranged from small startups (1-50 employees) to larger one (10,000+ employees) like Uber, Visa, and Amazon.

Of the 51 Product Manager positions we analyzed, 33 of the openings were labeled as Product Manager roles and 18 of them were Senior Product Manager roles.

Here's what we learned:

Insight 1: The #1 thing Product Managers own is product documentation.

65% of job postings had the PM responsible for Product documentation. Documentation included outlining user requirements, building roadmaps, tracking feature requests, and creating any other written artifacts needed to build a Product.

A primary responsibility of a Product Manager is to catalog decisions and organize information to share with the rest of the team. Here are a few examples of how companies include this in their job descriptions:

"Create clear artifacts along the Product development process. Deliver clear process maps that visualize the user journey and crisp specs that clearly communicate requirements with your partner teams."

"Identify, specify, and prioritize product features and capabilities; develop market requirement documents and product requirement documents. Create content for competitive materials and product documentation"

"Craft and evaluate future product opportunities with our customers; create and maintain a consistent and measurable roadmap spanning both smaller features and more ambitious, market-shaping bets. Translate big-picture product strategy into detailed requirements and hypothesis-driven proofs of concept."

The top piece of documentation we saw owned by PMs was roadmaps - 61% of postings asked Product Managers to create and maintain a roadmap. Product Managers are expected to communicate why certain decisions are made and record what the team decides to build:

"Build a roadmap that aligns with company objectives and enables our team to provide quality care for our customers"

"You'll help define the product's roadmap and strategy, and deliver clear requirements that Designers and Engineers will use to bring your vision to life."

"Define, manage, and evolve product strategy, roadmap, and vision of a new scalable and versatile inventory management platform."

A PM's documentation responsibilities don't end with roadmaps. We saw several other pieces of content a PM is expected to own. The most common included:

- Product and user requirement documents (39% of postings)
- General analysis and market research reporting (31% of postings)
- User stories (14% of postings)

A PM needs to be diligent in outlining and organizing information in order to build and ship the right things to customers. It makes sense that documentation is a key part of the Product Manager role.

Insight 2: 73% of Product Managers spend time on feature prioritization.

The majority of PMs also spend time prioritizing which features to build. In most cases, this consisted of gathering information from customers and stakeholders to determine what to build and when to build it.

"Prioritize and ship features and products across the full product lifecycle."

"Assertively guide product definition, feature prioritization, and scope."

"Identify, specify, and prioritize features and capabilities through direct input with customers and developers."

Prioritization is one of the trickiest parts of a PM's job. Product Managers are constantly required to gather information from customers and the rest of the company (leadership, sales, marketing, customer support, engineering) in order to determine what to build.

PMs sort through a lot of noise every day to determine what to build. And once they have the priorities decided, they have to get key stakeholders aligned too.

Insight 3: Fewer than half of PMs are expected to talk to customers.

I couldn't believe this when I saw it. Only 45% of PMs are expected to conduct customer research. That's less than half of PMs! Customer research is the lifeblood of building product. But apparently not everyone thinks that based on our analysis.

Just under half of the companies are looking for Product people who know how to be close to the customer and understand the market.

"Talk to customers often to identify and solve for their unspoken and unmet needs."

"Develop deep insights into customer needs and how product services address those needs."

"Represent the company as a domain and product expert at industry events, customer visits, and other outbound activities."

Research plays a big role in a Product Manager's ability to determine what's next for a Product. Without it, you're shooting in the dark, trying to solve customer problems that you might be wrong about. PMs can't work on hunches. They need to be data-informed and customer focused in order to succeed.

Insight 4: Empathy is one of the most important personal skills a Product Manager can have.

Empathy, the ability to not only understand but also share the feelings of another, is a critical skill for PMs to have. Why? Because understanding the customer is literally everything when it comes to building Product.

Of the roles we analyzed, 49% said they were looking for PMs who can empathize with customers and company stakeholders.

"Empathy: You deeply understand how customers think. You can accurately predict how changes will make them feel. You enjoy creating delight."

"Strong customer and stakeholder empathy with the ability to be the voice of the customer, as well as marketing, engineering, and customer success as needed."

PMs need to be able to step into the customer's shoes. To see the world through their eyes. To deeply understand the customer's perspective and be able to use that knowledge to build solutions that delight the customer. And to convince the rest of the company about their vision.

Insight 5: Most PMs don't own the metrics their work will be measured against.

Though PMs often define a Product's strategy, very few (30%) own which metrics define a Product's success.

Instead, most PMs are responsible for linking their efforts to larger company goals.

"Align your product strategy to company goals and drive positive business outcomes."

"Understand the business needs and translate them into clear and explicit product specifications; drive product documentation for different audiences."

"Establish a framework for prioritization of technology development work based on business goals."

A PM's role is to translate not only the needs of the customer, but to also match those to the needs of the business.

Insight 6: Product Managers are asked to be data-driven but most don't own a metric of any kind.

Product Managers are expected to make decisions that are backed by hard data about the customer. This expectation was echoed in the role descriptions we reviewed, where 59% of the positions expected PMs to have a strong understanding of analytics and how to interpret product data.

"You lead with data and research, not assumptions."

"You have the ability to get hands-on with data and derive insights from a complex data set. Expertise writing SQL queries is a plus."

"Exceptional analytical and quantitative modeling skills with a focus on data-driven decision making."

"Strong organizational and analytical skills are essential for success in this role. You must be able to solve complex issues and translate solutions into simple concepts for customers and all employees within the company to understand and approve."

Companies look for PMs who are able to independently verify assumptions through research and analysis, and simplify complex problems down to clear priorities. PMs are on their own to untangle uncertainty and figure out what data actually matters.

This is an unrealistic expectation that sets Product Managers up for failure. Leadership hasn't decided what data matters most but they expect PMs to figure it out on their own.

Insight 7: Product Managers are expected to work with engineering.

Nearly all postings (95%) said that the PM would work alongside engineers.

While PMs don't own shipping code, they need to be able to collaborate with engineering to understand estimates, sequencing, and trade-offs.

"Develop a technical understanding of our product's systems and work with engineers and stakeholders to identify meaningful improvements."

"Partner with engineers and designers to ideate, prioritize and deliver great solutions for our customers and professionals."

"Collaborate with Engineering to implement and iterate on product strategy and design concepts."

Nothing moves forward without collaboration between Product and Engineering. PMs need to work with engineering early and often to be able to ship to customers. PMs and engineering have to collaborate on technical research, early discussions about features, going back and forth on estimates, discussing specs and tradeoffs, as well as working together while a Product is being iterated. This was the second biggest commonality between all the roles

we looked at.

As a PM, getting close to engineering is almost as important as being close to the customer. Learning how to work with engineers is a vital skill set to learn as a PM. Here are a few things I do to make sure that I'm close to engineering:

- Don't just hand the engineering team work. Instead, bring them into the decision making process. Ask engineering for feedback as you design and write specs. Take them on the journey with you.
- Share customer insights and product priorities to help engineers understand the 'why' behind what you're building.
- Learn how to interpret what engineers say. When an engineer says a feature or timeline isn't possible, have a conversation with them to explore workarounds or tradeoffs.

Insight 8: 71% of companies want PMs that can clearly write and articulate ideas.

Nearly every company is in search of a PM who can effectively communicate. PMs work across multiple departments and influence a range of team members, from customer success all the way to senior management. So they have to be able to clearly communicate to a wide audience.

"PM should be able to manage multiple projects and collaborate effectively with other people and departments in a fast-paced, dynamic environment. An exceptionally strong writer and presenter."

"Excellent written and verbal communication skills. Ability to influence and motivate people across a broad variety of job functions through your relationships. Strong ability to collaborate with and present to senior executives."

Companies want PMs who can influence people across the company, drive team alignment, and communicate ideas across different groups. Communication is also a required skill given that PMs own Product documentation.

Insight 9: Retention was absent from job postings.

Retention is a critical indicator of Product/market fit and how effective a Product is at delivering value. Yet, based on our analysis, Product does not explicitly own retention. Not a single posting we evaluated included any mention of retention or responsibilities related to keeping customers engaged with Products and features.

This is surprising considering how important retention and engagement are. One would think that part of a PMs job is to monitor and increase retention with the initiatives they undertake.

That doesn't seem to be the case.

This leads me to wonder, if Product people aren't responsible for retention, who is? *A question for another day.*

We learned all about what Product Managers are required to do, be like and know based on our analysis of 51 Silicon Valley tech company job postings. Here are the nine key insights we found:

- Insight 1: The #1 thing Product Managers own is product documentation.
- Insight 2: 73% of Product Managers spend time on feature prioritization.
- Insight 3: Fewer than half of PMs are expected to talk to customers.
- Insight 4: Empathy is one of the most important personal skills a Product Manager can have.
- Insight 5: Most PMs don't own the metrics their work will be measured against.
- Insight 6: Product Managers are asked to be data-driven but most don't own a metric of any kind.
- Insight 7: Product Managers are expected to work with engineering.
- Insight 8: 71% of companies want PMs that can clearly write and articulate ideas.
- Insight 9: Retention was absent from job postings.

With all these insights, we've clearly answered my questions and more:

What are companies actually hiring Product Managers to do? What responsibilities should a PM expect to own? And what product skills are in demand?

Product Managers need a wide range of skills so that they are able to effectively communicate across different departments, from leadership, to engineering, to sales. They need to be constantly thinking about their customers and aligning stakeholders to keep the team moving forward. A PM is expected to untangle uncertainty by finding and using data to make the right tradeoffs and strategic decisions.

Managing Products can be hard and if you've ever done it before, you know that it's one of the most rewarding work experiences you can get.

Our mailing address is:
Up Advisors, LLC.
13337 South St. #269
Cerritos, California 90623

Add us to your address book

Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can update your preferences or unsubscribe from this list