PRODUCT MANAGEMENT
THE ART & SCIENCE OF HIRING

By
NITIN
KUMAR

Product Management: Art and Science of Hiring

While bad product manager traits are abundantly clear, good product manager traits are always set in context of the organization, industry, type of product, stage of product and go-to-market motion.

Introduction

Product management as a function means different things to different organizations. Over my career spanning line management, management consulting, and executive management, I have seen half a dozen different configurations for this function. Some for good reasons and others just bad decisions. Although, two things are abundantly clear i.e., hiring PMs is part art and part science and there is more awareness, experience, and sophistication when it comes to hiring product managers.

Many different factors e.g., stage of the company, type of product, industry, target customers and the caliber of engineering, pre-sales, customer success etc. will determine the type of product manager needed. There is no one size, fit all and everyone is never going to be good at everything. For example, in the days I used to run large organizations delivering cyber security products and services, we sold to deep domain and technical experts and hence made a choice to have PMs with strong engineering skills. On the other hand, when I oversaw a product enhancing appeal of consulting services through better customer experience, we indexed on visual appeal and required a lot of UX depth with the PMs.

Types of Product Managers

Product Manager jobs are not as standard and templatized as one would believe, they are always a blend of skills like design, engineering, domain, vision, stakeholder management, customer interface etc. The type of product and the stage of the company are also important inputs into the type of PM who will work well. Knowing what you want, helps hire smarter while putting relative strengths and weaknesses of the organization in perspective. It also helps analyze the people who will do well in specific phases of the product lifecycle and evolution. If you hire a wrong PM, you could be set

back by months – hence this is one of the most critical roles for product companies.

Let us examine a few PM types, I have seen through my career and some observations based on experience on who fits where:

Design Junkies

They have likely earned their chops through high quality work, aesthetic appeal, and customer appreciation. There is nothing not to like about this type of a PM. This type of an individual fits only specific situations i.e., a strong engineering team building good code, but the product lacks polish, has a few bugs, dated design requiring a designer level of detailing. These individuals are not a good fit when quick and dirty fixes and needed, rapid prototyping is the norm and quick iterations are required. Speed is not a friend of the design-oriented PM, perfection is. It is easy to spot the design-oriented PM, showing a crude prototype to them their answer for improvement would be centered around customer facing issues rather than deep product problems. Hire wisely by putting things in context.

Speed Processors

These kinds are go-getters, they drive, move fast, have broad skills, and can multi-task adeptly. If you are from the Silicon Valley, you know exactly what I mean given these are the most common PMs we come across. Rapid stakeholder alignment, cross fucntional coordination, good communication can lighten load for rest of the group. These individuals are great fits for product launches and timely shipping of features. Their ideal situation is when the product-market fit is proven and speed to market is critical to gain a leg up on competition. They are not good fits when there is a new ground breaking product to be built creating a new market with more vision, intuition and lack of research data with heavy beta testing and building a new go-to-market motion around an evolving product. This type of PM is the most commonly available in the ecosystem and easy to evaluate – show them a concept product, they will try to throw a rapid process and execution roadmap on it with a path to quick shipping. Hire them when the situation is right.

Business Jockeys

Yet another common PM type, they are cross functional experts with a few years spent in the industry or domain. They are very process, metric and data driven with great insights on the market trends – they usually come with ability to make well informed decisions on the product strategy with ability to convince enterprise grade customers. They are most suitable when the product is already set with some traction but now needs to scale through direct enterprise customers or partnerships, they will bring te desired maturity to operate at scale being the conduit between business strategy, customer strategy, product strategy and the technical folks. They are best suited for situations when there is quick and iterative feedback from customers or even some features are in the blue-sky zone, but rest of the product is maturing. They are not a good fit during lack of scale, requirements are harder to quantify, ROI is ambiguous and intuition needs are higher than data and metrics. I have also observed that a heavier business background makes it challenging to interface with deep technologists and requires a certain buffer within the PM team. They are also easy to identify, because they run on well defined, structured requirements, navigating uncertainty and ambiguity is a challenged for them. Understand the product maturity, features in market, level of iteration and explore if they are a fit for the situation.

Enthusiastic Newbies

It is a well-known fact that exceptional product managers have been built, they have gravitated into these roles from diverse backgrounds without a formal path to chart. Even today, other than a handful of companies, we do not have formal PM development tracks. New talent is sourced, nurtured, and developed to adapt to situations for the most part. Newbies are hired for potential, not their experience or performance – they have no idea on product management and need support. They learn fast, have enthusiasm, energy, fire in the belly, are ambitious with a fail fast mindset. Newbie PMs should be hired only under specific situations e.g., in start-ups where they do the daily blocking and tackling while the executives own the product vision and have the time to handhold these individuals while harnessing their energy. They are very good fits in large organizations where there are formalized process to train, mentor, groom on the job through handling more tactical jobs or being an apprentice to more senior PMs, they can make progress towards the tactical tasks for longer term priorities. This type of individual is not a good fit for urgent items to ship, heavy ideation is involved, or they must process a grand product vision quickly. Hire them only if you can provide good support and time to mentor.

Order Takers

I have run into PMs who have gravitated to the disciple from services companies, while they can operationalize ideas to action- there exists a baggage. The baggage is the services culture of saying "yes", a product culture needs to be able to say "no". These individuals have typically built products within services companies, many times the goal of the product is to drive additional services revenue. They are unable to filter ideas which create proper solutions and will quickly overwhelm the product roadmap. PMs capable of shutting down the noise and requests are more effective in the long term. An order taker mindset will burden everyone with unnecessary work, these PMs are also afraid of disagreements with executives or customers thereby creating poor prioritization. These individuals are harder to identify, their ability to come well in interviews, enthusiasm, and ability to talk the talk is very good. Hire them only if you have a product which has the goal of driving services revenue and keep them focused on working through features which create professional services value.

Product Management Skills: The Good and Bad

Product Management is one of the least clearly defined jobs today. Although one size does not fit all situations, organizations and customers, there are indeed some common traits of PMs which are table stakes in my experience.

Leadership

Good product managers must lead by influence not authority, they have many stakeholders internal and external to the organization creating a need for constant, iterative, and engaging alignment at a quick pace. Their job is to serve by leading and lead by serving, the servant leader is the role model style here. I have seen very instructive PM leaders, who constantly tell people what, when and how to do things. In my experience, none of them (other than Steve Jobs) ever built a good product in this mode of operation. Great product managers always have a nurturing style with their team even if they have terrific product ideas themselves, good PMs never think the buck stops at their idea.

Balance

Product Management is a healthy mix of the left and the right brain and this balance is necessary to succeed. Good PMs balance their data, fact and experiment driven approach with creativity, input from customers, back a vision, use gut feel and assume certain risks. I have seen PMs at two ends of the spectrum, one totally crippling the organization with over engineered processes, cadence, metrics etc. and other having total rejection of any structure, rigor, discipline, and timelines. There is a fine balance between outcomes and deadlines many times i.e., iterating to get things right versus getting things delivered. Poor PMs deliver fixed scope against timelines and shipping more features.

There is a fine balance between outcomes and deadlines many times i.e., iterating to get things right versus getting things delivered. Poor PMs deliver fixed scope against timelines and shipping more features. A balance is the best way here, most start-ups churn through a couple of PMs before they ultimately land the right balance. This balancing attribute of a PM is applicable across their stakeholders internal and external to the organization, they must manage all expectations in a very respectful manner. It does not take long to identify a poor PM; they forget people below them instantly and most times customers.

Focus

The make or break item and the dividing line between great and poor PMs is the element of focus. Great PMs really understand their customer needs, behaviors and thought process through constant contact and direct communication, mediocre PMs rely on some research to understand the market on a secondary basis and poor PMs run for cover behind to the sales, marketing, customer support, customer success or even the C-suite. Great product managers are always focused on the customer needs, not volume of features.

Cross Functional Capability

Good PMs are entrenched into the sales and marketing motion of the product with deep understanding of how customers buy, their job does not end with feature shipping. Good PMs can also come from any disciple i.e., pre-sales, engineering, R&D, customer success etc. but if they understand their cross fucntional role, they can be successful. Poor PMs start managing people in the areas that they know best and deviate from their job, good products are not built in a day, they evolve constantly through involvement of all disciplines.

Bad Behaviors: Some Personal Experiences/Observations:

Having spent a long career in the TMT (Technology, Media and Telcom) sectors, I have seen multiple examples of avoidable behavior. A long list might be challenging to put, but let me put down a few thoughts:

- Hiring the wrong type of PM in the wrong context, situation and getting defensive when results are not visible.
- Too many order takers, design junkies in the team; insisting on engineering heavy PMs, over indexing on domain centric knowledge and failing to deliver on all fronts.
- Too much internal focus, with product managers not entrenched with customers but prioritizing based on organization's executives and/or political process.
- Bad Product Managers are always fighting fires, good PMs focus on fire avoidance through good upstream management.
- Sticking to rigid processes with an inability to course-correct, adapt and pivot quickly while carrying the organization on the journey.
- Going too much by gut feel or too much process and metric burden i.e., missing balance or tilting balance.

- Saying "yes" to everyone and overwhelming the organization.
- Too many compromises for the short-term, neglecting the long-term future of the product.
- Overplaying the "CEO of the product" role definition and undermining teams.

Concluding Thoughts:

Good product managers are contextual, an excellent fit in one situation may not work well in others. There is still part art and part science when it comes to hiring good PMs, one needs to first understand their own situation and then bring the right type of individual. I have personally developed some of these filters through direct experience over years, but it is by no means a conclusive list. However, bad PMs usually lack punctuality, miss deadlines, deliver half-baked products, micromanage, and hide behind others – easier to spot and change out. The ground reality is that PMs need to be allowed to make some mistakes, experimentation is never 100% guarantee of getting things right. It is a tough job and the backbone of a product company requiring focus, energy, mental strength, and ability to cope with conflicting agendas. Always hire the right type of PM for the right job within the right context.

About the Author:

Nitin Kumar is a two-decade veteran in the Hi-Tech industry. He is currently the CEO of Appnomic but played a variety of hands on executive roles ranging from CEO, Chief Growth Officer, Chief Transformation Officer, M&A Integration/Separation Leader, BU Head and Management Consulting Partner (corporate and PE portfolio companies). His passion is propelling organizations to greater levels of success through strong relationships and differentiated products. He is considered a business builder, thought leader and pioneer of many innovative approaches. Nitin Kumar is a member of the Forbes Technology Council and shares his ideas and thoughts on the forum regularly.

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