

Product Management: The Agile Development Balancing Act?

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Customer, Project Sponsor, Product Manager, Product Champion ... software development processes old and new have recognised and talked about a family of crucial roles to do with project scope and maintaining contact with the end-user's reality, expressed in many different ways: sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory, sometimes obvious, sometimes just silly (am I the only one sick of reading yet another gushing tribute to the mythical "product champion"?)

Of course, non-software product development has a well-established understanding of this role. And yet again, we software people have attempted to swallow the signs and lore of this field without really understanding it in the context of a software project. So a high-end view of the project manager (see for example *Managing Software Requirements*, Leffingwell/Widrig, Addison Wesley, 2003) would have them responsible for all research, development, production and marketing budget, and live with the product from cradle to grave. I've not seen this happen at all in software development, certainly not agile software development: the level of attention to delivery in an agile environment means that anyone with the level of authority implied by the above will by definition not be nearly close enough to the development world.

Conversely, when developing for a small coherent set of users it may be ideal for one or more real users to work closely with the development team representing the users' interests, providing domain knowledge and making quantitative and qualitative judgements. However, even in these circumstances, it can be difficult to find people that can dedicate the necessary time and have the ability to perform the role well. In situations where the user base is larger or more diverse or even nonexistent, such as in a start-up company scenario, choosing a user or even a group of users as the customer can be impossible. Consolidating requirements, mediating between diverse stakeholders (which in a corporate environment may include users, sponsors, managers and support personnel, or in a software company may include external users, marketing, sales, support and management people), balancing priorities, providing comprehensive domain expertise, generalising features, creating or evaluating designs and defining values are skills that may reasonably be required of the Customer that are very often not skills possessed by users. The role of Customer is often (depending on the domain and the skills of the development team) a specialist role.

Many projects use business analysts to try to bridge the gap between users and developers, but the traditional business analyst role is quite different to that of Customer in agile projects.

So we'd like to explore the proposition that the Product Manager role is closer to that of the Customer (albeit an idealised and specially-skilled one) than that of the Product Manager in non-software environments. This think tank, will look at the fit of Product Manager in the Customer role. We will examine the impact this has on other roles and consider what makes a good product manager in both software product and corporate environments.

Participants will draw on their experiences of development. We'll share stories of projects that went well, and those that didn't, from which we'll use some tried-and-tested spatial and associative techniques for identifying the key characteristics of the role itself, and the skills and personal qualities of individuals who we think will best fill it.