PRODUCT MANAGEMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE: LESSONS FROM PYRAMIDS AND CANALS

Over decades, I have been lucky to learn from master product management leaders. I have learnt from them the art of specifying and designing hardware, software and service products.

I have seen them pricing to extract most value; seen them coaxing engineering, manufacturing, and services teams to get what they wanted. I have had the pleasure of attracting and growing strong product management teams in my businesses.

There are a few cardinal rules of product management that are relevant more than ever in the digital age where technology and business complexity reign on one end; user experience and consumption preferences reign at the other; and options galore on how to meet those requirements. So what is a master juggler of a product manager to do? Well, some rules never change as long as you can apply them for the changed situation. They have to do with specifying right, framing right, and finding the product-pallet fit.

Specify It Right
Product managers get what they specify, not what they wish. If you over-specify, the product will be over budget (time and costs) and will limit the creative options that your architects and engineers can incorporate.
My favorite example of this is the construction of Panama Canal. The canal as we know was made to get from the eastern seaboard to the western seaboard of the Americas. It looks like this on paper.

In reality, the canal looks like this.
As the arrow shows, the canal is northwest to southeast in orientation, not east to west.

If Theodore Roosevelt had specified that the canal MUST be east-west, and the engineers had blindly obeyed, one can only imagine the extra cost and the additional deaths from yellow fever that would have befallen Panama.

On the other hand, if you under-specify, your teams will spin, scratching their heads trying to read your mind. The product concept will be changing hourly from elephant to camel to giraffe as teams come to grips with it. Nothing will ever get built.

**Frame It Right**

Defining the job-to-be-done is not a cliché to be read about and forgotten. If the problem is defined as “build cheap transportation method from A to B”, we might end up with Uber; if the problem is defined as “build cheap car for millennials”, we’ll end up with a compact hybrid electric. Or if the problem is defined as “enable team collaboration”, we may end up with Slack; “enable groups to talk” may result in conference calling. None of them is outright wrong. Your organizational context determines which is right.

**Know the ultimate job to be done, then frame the problem at the right level for your organization.**

This is true whether building a cool cloud-controlled drone widget or you are building a beautiful wall. (Sorry, couldn’t resist!)

**Find the Product-Pallet Fit**

Another truism we all know is about finding the product-market fit, especially in early stages of your business. However, in complex product markets, the channel’s needs are equally critical just as the end customer’s needs are. Your product design has to accommodate for that or you will end up having a camel that doesn’t fit the pallet it gets shipped in. Or you’ll build a train that is intended for broad-gauge tracks, but the tracks are still narrow-gauge.

In the digital age, value chains are getting knotted. So channel considerations need to go right into the product design. Without product-pallet fit, you will not have the market reach or hit scale.

**Write it Down! Pyramid or Cube?**

Finally, if you haven’t seen this advertisement, watch this and remember to always document your specs. At least you’ll have something to show your management should things go wrong despite your best efforts.

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QUICK WORK IS NEEDED: A TRANSITION TO DIGITAL PRODUCT MANAGEMENT FOR THE REST OF US

A broad, digital product management focused transformation across all companies and technology teams is finally upon us.
Gartner, a key source in the enterprise world, has made the decree in its latest report “Reinventing Applications as Products for the Digital World”. Although it’s easy to argue those like Marty Cagan had been doing it and began writing about it more than a decade ago.

By 2020, three-quarters of digital business leaders will have pivoted from project to product portfolio management, up from the one-third that have already pivoted today.

By 2020, organizations that have embraced the product model will outperform the competition that has not, in both customer satisfaction and business results.

Why Digital Product Management?

From my standpoint, there are three reasons why these methods are the future.

One, they better connect your team’s technology actions to customer and business outcomes which in the end are what matters most.

Two, these methods are better oriented to things that change quickly. Allowing you to more likely be right by iterating towards an end goal rather than charting a course a year out and putting your head in the sand to deliver it as conceived.

Three, a Digital Product Manager is a hybrid thinker that we all need in our technology team but often don’t have today. Their mindset and background might split ~30% Communication, ~25% Customer, ~25% Business Acumen & ~20% Technical — leaders with this balance can often overcome more obstacles than the traditional technical and financial-minded IT worker.

More from Gartner on the topic…

As organizations deliver more capabilities via digital experiences across multiple touchpoints, the concept of an application is evolving: bringing hybrid portfolios composed of a mix of conventional applications and products, and with agile product management.

Lean IT is the combination of enterprise agile, agile development and DevOps, as required to deliver an end-to-end, product-driven value chain. This value chain comprises teams that deliver a continuous stream of business capabilities, prioritized by product management to deliver the most valuable capabilities first. Such teams often have persistent sources of funding that are provided by the business owner for the product domain.

The Challenge is Speed and Clarity

“2020” was a shorthand term for “the future” since my childhood but… hey… That’s 2 years from now and from what I’ve seen in my time working across industries, most companies have a long way to go.

For some of us, we’ve found ways to work this way in pockets for years — but it was seen as an upstart, “innovation team,” or non-standard model that only few were allowed. Even companies in that “partial-product” state will have a lot of work to do. We focused on our part of the work and often ignored the hard parts, we’re challenged to scale now.

This will mean many of the traditionally non-tech companies will be looking to move this way quickly. They’ll be looking for concrete answers and methods but as many of us know, there isn’t a one-size fits all answer. There will be confusion, we need to better collect the resources to get ahead of this.

The Key Questions

I recently attended an event with the CEB group with technology leaders from companies big and small discussing the move towards Digital Product approaches. Through discussion, we quickly learned the themes and questions held true, the hold-backs and the challenges were very similar.
• How do we better connect the work we are doing to the higher-level goals of the company?

• How will we show the value of our digital knowledge and skills and earn the business trust needed?

• How will our team culture transition from order-taking to setting the direction and delivering?

• How do we need to think about growing or finding digital product management talent?

• How will we unlock decision-making to drive more agility?

• How will we fund and measure our work?

• How will we continue to ensure delivery and quality?

• Will everything work in a singular new “product” method?

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WHY PRODUCT MANAGEMENT AND DIGITAL MARKETING SHOULD COEXIST?

Digital Marketing is the engagement of technologies such as websites, e-mail, web apps, mobile apps and social media for the purpose of marketing a product. Though this term applies to any business that wants to reach its consumers through electronic media, SaaS based products rely on it for at least 90% their marketing initiatives.

Product Management spans many activities, from strategic to tactical, and at its best provides cross-functional leadership while bridging gaps within the company between different functions, most notably between engineering-oriented teams, sales and marketing, and support.

Given the definition of these functions, I have come to realize that neither Product Management nor Digital Marketing can independently exist without the insights and strategic inputs of the other function.

As rightly pointed out by Brian Balfour in his article about Growth and Marketing, Product activation, customer retention, revenue and
referral together along with other marketing activities constitute growth and it requires Product and Marketing teams to work in tandem.

Customer Activation

Once a website visitor is convinced about the product and the moment s/he decides to signup, On-boarding process begins. This is generally called customer activation which involves a string of steps.

There are high chances for a user to bounce off during the on-boarding process if there is no clarity or simplicity to achieve what they intend to, during the process.

Here is where the Product team, which virtually owns on-boarding, needs to sync up with Digital Marketing team to understand the user behavior and design the on-boarding effectively — taking care of information to be collected from user, number of steps to activate the product, time taken to complete the process, what the user should do once in the application, launching email programs to guide the users during trial usage etc.

Referral and Feedback Process

The journey of the two functions does not stop once a user adopts the product. Launching referral programs and enabling a feedback process which could help both marketing and product optimize their roadmap requires them to continue working together.

Deployment of customer deployment
applications like Intercom, right time to connect with the users when in the application, drive user communication and feedback, getting issues resolved and optimizing feature roadmap based on the feedback etc. highly depend on how far these functions go hand in hand and understand each others’ limitations and priorities.

And so..

Every successful SaaS product would have recognized this need, at some point of business cycle, to bring together marketing and product teams to make the customer lifecycle healthy.

The products that do not realize this take a long time to iterate, get feedback from customers and change the way user-product interactions work. Such products require a change in mentality, inter-team processes and team structures. While established product organizations may struggle to understand and initiate such a change, this is just imminent.
Ben has spent over a decade growing digital commerce at high scale, Fortune 100, multi-channel retailer. He guides, consults and directly drives digital strategy, a user experience focus and digital transformations in companies ranging from Fortune 50 to startup.

Vijay is an accomplished IoT Product Leader with over 11 years of experience in Product Strategy/ Roadmap, End to End Product Launch, Agile Product Management, User Experience and Analytics. He has taken to market several SaaS and Enterprise software solutions by defining the strategy, goals, scope and working through the solution from end-to-end.

Hari is the founder of The Cerebrus Group, the digital strategy advisory group assisting businesses modernize their products and services for the digital age. He has decades of experience managing global portfolios for services, systems, and software businesses ranging from millions to billions. Currently Hari is focused on using technology to enable better health outcomes.
“Yoga is a method to come to a non-dreaming mind.
Yoga is the science to be in the here and now.”

Osho

June 21st
International Day of Yoga