



AGILE2018

SAN DIEGO

AUGUST 6-10



Richard Seroter

Product Ownership Explained

A background image for the Agile 2018 event in San Diego. It features a blurred orange and white train moving from left to right in the foreground. In the background, there is a tall palm tree and a brick building. The image has a warm, yellowish-orange tint.

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	Product Owner jobs	JavaScript Developer jobs	DevOps Engineer jobs
CA	8,373	5,172	2,735
IL	2,513	1,068	512
SC	610	158	43



**PRODUCT OWNERS
ARE IN DEMAND**

A BAD PRODUCT OWNER DRAGS YOU DOWN

A photograph of a road sign with the word "USEFUL" in large, bold, black letters. The sign is mounted on a wooden post. In the background, a road curves through a landscape with trees and a car is visible in the distance. Overlaid on the right side of the sign is the text "OUR GOAL?" in a white box. Below that, two more white boxes contain the text "CONTINUOUSLY DELIVER" and "USEFUL PRODUCTS." respectively.

USEFUL

OUR GOAL?

CONTINUOUSLY DELIVER

USEFUL PRODUCTS.

**Define the
product
owner role**

**See what
good and
bad look like.**

**Discuss how
to build a
product
owner
practice.**

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What is the role of the product owner?

“The Product Owner is responsible for maximizing the value of the product resulting from work of the Development Team.”

- *Scrum Guide*

What is the role of the product owner?



"In Scrum the Product Owner is defined as the person who is responsible for grooming the backlog, in Agile it was defined as the representative of the business."

– *mindtheproduct.com*

"When you look at the role of the Product Owner in most Scrum literature, their three main responsibilities include the following: define backlog, groom it, accept completed stories."

– *<https://medium.com/@melissaperri>*

"In order to be a Professional Product Owner you need to initiate and drive the product."

– *InfoQ.com*

"Product owners don't represent the business or the development team — they represent the customers who will ultimately use products, internally or externally."

– *gartner.com*

Product owner

Associated with Scrum

Responsible for iteration goals

Defines epics, stories & success criteria

Acts as voice of the customer

Has short to mid-range focus

Product manager

Originated back in the 1930s

Responsible for strategic roadmap

Defines high-level epics and MVPs

Represents vision on behalf of business

Has long-term focus

“Product Owner is a role you play on a Scrum team. Product Manager is the job.”
- *Melissa Perri*

What are the tools of a product owner?

- Backlog management
- Sprint planning and execution tool
- Roadmap creation tool
- Prototyping, wireframing tools
- Team collaboration tool
- Surveying and user testing tools
- Analytics tools
- Product visioning tools and techniques

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Advocating process and tools

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Fits agile and scrum processes to team
- ✓ Not obsessed with ceremony
- ✓ Pragmatic about tool choices
- ✓ Encourage consistency where it matters
- ✓ EXPLAINS the value behind a process
- ✓ Demonstrates willingness to evolve based on feedback

- ✓ Applies same practices everywhere
- ✓ Demands adherence to agile activities
- ✓ Defines allowable toolchain
- ✓ Pushes standardization everywhere
- ✓ Believes the process speaks for itself
- ✓ Trusts the process over the team

Style of leadership

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Leads through influence
- ✓ Earns respect via credibility
- ✓ Builds consensus
- ✓ Decisive (even with incomplete info)
- ✓ Shows up
- ✓ Open to changing their mind
- ✓ Tracks and shares meaningful metrics

- ✓ (Attempt to) lead through authority
- ✓ Demands respect because of position
- ✓ Makes solo decisions
- ✓ Gets stuck in analysis paralysis
- ✓ Unavailable to the team
- ✓ Stubborn, even in the face of new facts
- ✓ Tracks and shares vanity metrics

Customer interactions

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Meets individually with customers
- ✓ Builds relationship with key customers
- ✓ Participates in on-call rotation
- ✓ Attends/hosts customer visits
- ✓ Digs into tickets, usage, and survey data

- ✓ Gets secondhand information from sales
- ✓ Keeps all customers at arm's length
- ✓ Doesn't feel the "pain" of production
- ✓ Avoids direct interactions
- ✓ Uses internal feedback for prioritization

Relationship with engineers

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ **Physically co-locates when possible**
- ✓ **Works to know the technical domain**
- ✓ **Attends standups**
- ✓ **Shares useful information about customers and use cases**
- ✓ **Champion for the team, and protects engineer's time**

- ✓ **Stays remote or away from engineers**
- ✓ **Keeps a business-only focus**
- ✓ **Avoids standups**
- ✓ **Doesn't bring outside information into the team**
- ✓ **Defaults to defending everyone BUT engineers**

Approach to continuous improvement

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Constantly pushes for shorter sprints
- ✓ Owns action items out of retrospectives
- ✓ Willingly evolves planning process
- ✓ Allocates time for technical debt, not just feature work

- ✓ Keeps sprints the same, or extends them
- ✓ Leaves action items to engineers
- ✓ Sticks to existing planning process and hopes "team gets better at estimating"
- ✓ Leaves no sprint cycles for bugs or tech debt

Product lifecycle perspective

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Pays attention to the “first run” experience
- ✓ Thinks about operator experience (e.g. install, stability, upgrades)
- ✓ Considers the impact of breaking changes
- ✓ Actively tries to retire features

- ✓ Ignores customer onboarding processes
- ✓ Keeps attention on development, not operations
- ✓ Doesn't assess risk of major changes
- ✓ Constant adds, but removes nothing from the product

Sourcing backlog items

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Talks to customers!
- ✓ Engages with front-line support staff
- ✓ Ensures that product team members can suggest items
- ✓ Has a clearly-defined intake channel
- ✓ Crafts a prioritization strategy

- ✓ Doesn't actively solicit customer feedback
- ✓ Ignores operator, support input
- ✓ Makes it difficult for engineers to submit ideas
- ✓ Has inconsistent intake system
- ✓ Defines arbitrary priorities

Decomposing work

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Applies “progressive refinement” and thin-slicing

- ✓ Believes in horizontal slices and big bangs

**Progressive
refinement? No.**

**This isn't useful
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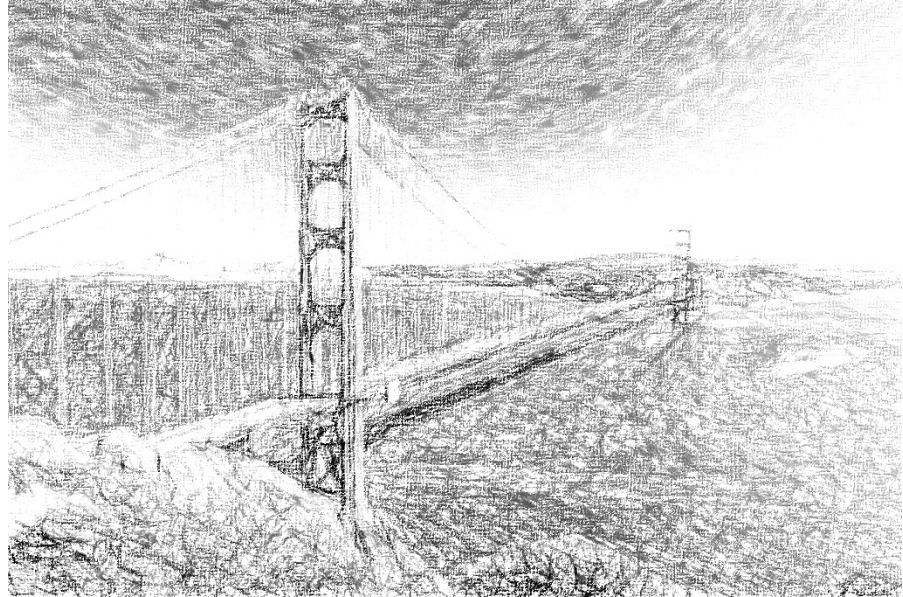
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**Progressive
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**Immediately useful,
with option to keep
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Decomposing work

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Applies “progressive refinement” and thin-slicing
- ✓ Encourage sprint stories that take no longer than two days
- ✓ Looks for work that can be completed by one person/pair without handoffs

- ✓ Believes in horizontal slices and big bangs
- ✓ Allows unbounded stories
- ✓ Crafts stories that require the contribution of multiple devs/teams

Running through a sprint

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Lets team decide when a sprint is “full”
- ✓ Doesn't add new items without taking something out
- ✓ Focuses on customer value and outcomes, not raw output/points
- ✓ Ensures that there's a release at the end of each sprint

- ✓ Tells the team what's in the sprint
- ✓ Adds new items and makes the team “figure it out”
- ✓ Religiously tracks point velocity
- ✓ Allows sprints to conclude without a release

Meeting involvement

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Participates in sprint planning sessions
- ✓ Conducts or joins in retrospectives
- ✓ Represents the team in org-wide operations reviews and strategy sessions
- ✓ Attends PO-only standups, training

- ✓ Gives the team sprint scope and skips the planning session
- ✓ Avoids retrospectives
- ✓ Fails to share team metrics, priorities, and accomplishments
- ✓ Doesn't spend time advancing their craft

Approach to roadmap

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Uses it to convey themes and priorities
- ✓ Highlights recent accomplishments
- ✓ Takes an agile approach to priorities
- ✓ Doesn't promise things w/o engineers
- ✓ Socializes liberally with stakeholders

- ✓ Treats it as business commitments
- ✓ Includes chart of features + dates
- ✓ Keeps rigid focus on stated goals
- ✓ Commits team to features and timelines
- ✓ Avoids sharing the team's priorities

Outbound communication

Good product owner

vs

Bad product owner

- ✓ Sends regular updates to the org
- ✓ Shares priorities with other teams, management, customers
- ✓ Regularly demonstrates products and progress
- ✓ Errs on the side of transparency

- ✓ Keeps team progress a mystery
- ✓ Doesn't share priorities widely
- ✓ Fails to schedule demonstrations
- ✓ Errs on the side of secrecy

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Most people don't set out to be product owners.

... and some organizations don't think they need them!

- How do you spot aspiring product owners?
 - Creative problem solvers
 - Recognized leaders
 - Strong technical background
 - Synthesize information well and can explain multiple views
 - Strong communicators
- How can you build demand for product ownership?
 - Moving from projects to products
 - Start treating platforms as products
 - Educate!

Recipes for success

- Avoid renaming your project managers or business analysts
- Clearly define expectations and responsibilities
- Incubate with high performers on a handful of agile teams
- Demonstrate an executive-level commitment (and investment)
- Hire outside leaders to instantiate the program
- Perform regular retrospectives and over-communicate progress
- Invest in training and build up the community across the organization
 - Broad training to get a common language and peer group
 - Deep training to accelerate learning

Treat product ownership as the critical discipline that it is. Hire and grow your skill set.

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