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# The IPN Product Management Guide

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## Intro

This guide is an introduction on how to break into product management, whether you're a recent graduate or a working professional looking to transition to a PM role. We'll cover what a product manager does, the skills required to become a PM, the application process, and how to prepare for an interview. At the end of this guide are resources to help you further understand & prepare for the role.

## What is product management?

Product Managers are responsible for defining the vision of their product area, creating a strategy to achieve that vision, and executing upon that strategy. A PM is accountable for planning the entire lifecycle of a product from ideation to implementation to execution, focusing on the needs of the end customer to define the scope of the product requirements.


## Key Roles & Responsibilities

- **Product Vision and Strategy:** a PM defines the north star for their product, why the product matters, and the strategy and tactics that will help the team realize the product vision
- **Driving Execution:** a PM establishes the roadmap for the team, defines the goals and success metrics, and manages day-to-day execution to make sure that the team is making progress
- **Cross Functional Collaboration:** a PM ensures the entire product team (design, engineering, data, legal, etc) is working in lock-step and efficiently executing against milestones
- **Owning Communication:** a PM communicates upward to leadership for clarity and visibility into what the team is working on, identifies dependencies within other teams, and celebrates team milestones

- **Tackling and Unblocking:** a PM helps the team tackle and unblock issues on a real time basis - from managing trade offs, prioritizing objectives and projects, and resolving conflicts

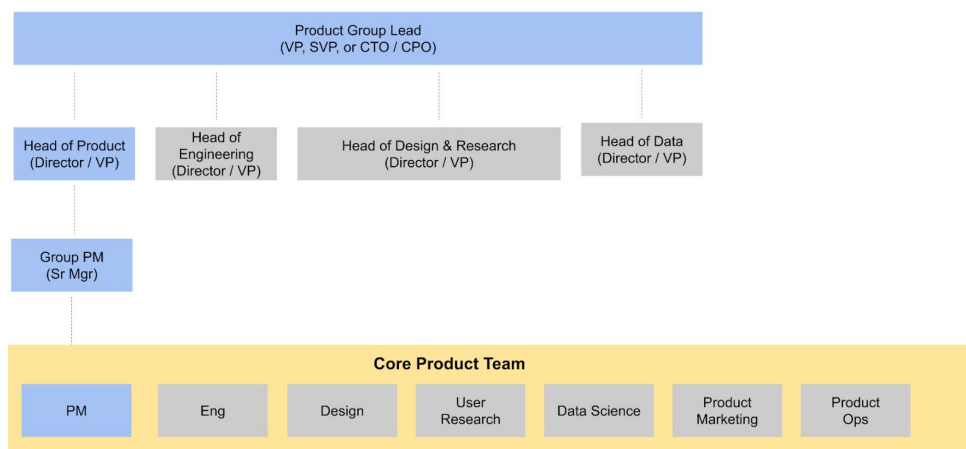
A product manager ensures that the product is successful and defines what success looks like considering the following assets:

- **Engineering:** a PM should work with the engineering manager & tech-lead to make sure engineers are executing upon the defined strategy and roadmap
- **Business:** a PM should have a good understanding of their customer base, the market they're trying to capture through the expansion of products and features, and justification on how his or her product ladders up to the organization's business. It helps to work with a growth marketer or product marketing manager!
- **Data:** a PM should work with data scientists to make data-driven decisions. This is useful to decide to pursue a new feature and plan product roadmaps
- **Design:** a PM works closely with design team(s) to craft an efficient user experience for their product

 **Sahil's Note:** These roles and responsibilities aren't equally needed—for example, some teams have engineers that work really quickly, but don't have a long-term strategy. You're responsible for recognizing this, building a strategy, & focusing less on day-to-day engineering tasks. You should be able to see where the team is lacking and fill that gap.

## Overview of a Product Organization

A product organization contains the people who build the product or service. Below is a chart of where a PM sits in the organization:



## **Career Progression**

Almost all product managers start as individual contributors. Most incoming product managers are either experienced hires who are making the switch (from consulting, completing an MBA, or another function such as product marketing, or ops) or are new/recent grads entering a rotational program.

As an entry level PM, you will most likely start as a junior individual contributor, and will work closely with a tech lead, a team of engineers, and cross-functional teams (across design, user research, product marketing, and data science). You'll spend ~30% of your time on product strategy, and ~70% of time on end-to-end execution planning, launching, and iterating on your product. An example is a PM working on a specific product feature (e.g. increasing reshares of Instagram posts).

As you continue to progress in your career, your scope will continue to increase, your engineering team may grow (to include a dedicated engineering manager that directly maps to you), and more cross-functional team members may be added to support your product scope. You'll start to spend more time on product strategy and cross-functional collaboration as a mid-level PM, while continuing to drive day-to-day execution.

As a senior PM, you can either continue to work as an individual contributor (note not every company has an individual contributor track, but companies are increasingly starting to invest in this) or can transition to management. Individual contributors will take on more ambiguous and complex projects with a senior cross-functional team. Managers will grow and cultivate a team of Product Managers, and will transition to spending ~60% of your time on product strategy and 40% on organization development.

Given the breadth of experience you gain as a PM (driving overall product strategy, ideation, iteration, product development, go to market, etc.), the Product Manager role allows you to establish a strong foundation to transition into a wide variety of leadership roles. Many PMs leave to start their own companies, while others pursue leadership roles in engineering, operations, or product (such as VP or SVP) and can even progress to a CPO or CTO role.

## **Why should or shouldn't you consider a career in Product Management?**

This is a question that only you can answer. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does thinking about building the future of a product or organization sound exciting?
- Do you like working with a team?
- Can you lead cross-functional teams towards a common goal?
- Are you willing to talk to customers/end users and understand their needs?


If it excites you to think about what could be and building that future with a team, product management will be a fun job. A product manager's job isn't only dreaming about the future - it's building it. This means endless meetings, aligning teams, and furthering progress. You may sometimes have to get your feet wet in areas like data or design if your team is blocked on those items and resource constrained. If you're entering product management due to its popularity or pay, you will likely burnout. It requires many months, sometimes years, of hard work to see your vision come to life.

## Paths to Product Management


### If you're in college or a new-grad:

In the tech industry, there are very few associate PM roles/internships available. The most well-known are Google APM, Facebook RPM, Uber, Lyft, LinkedIn, Twitter, Salesforce, Intuit, and Atlassian. Here's an exhaustive [list](#).

You do not need to complete a PM Internship to become a PM. Most new-grad PMs come from a variety of backgrounds (finance, consulting, engineering, design, data, construction, liberal arts).

 **Sahil's Note:** Getting a PM internship is very hard—there's very few & they're competitive.

One thing I've done in the past is leverage my internship experiences to cover the PM attributes. An example is in my design internship, I worked with a data scientist to do opportunity sizing for a new product feature (Data/Business). I then pitched this to the PM on my team and we got it on the roadmap (Teamwork). I then worked with engineering to build it (Engineering). I then leveraged this experience on my resume and interviews to show that I have the required skills to be a PM.

 **Farrah's Note:** MBA/Master's students are usually given priority to PM internships and new grad positions over students still in their undergraduate program. Still, nothing is impossible.


### If you're already working in tech:

If you're a working professional already, there are a few ways to break into product management:

- 1) **Build something!** - Product managers are builders at heart; they obsess over consumer problems, ideate and design solutions to address key needs, and build, test, iterate, and

launch products to the market. What is a pain point you personally empathize with? What product solution would make this easier? Put together a product outline, design and end-to-end workflow, and roll your sleeves up and prototype a concept. Not only will this allow you to immerse yourself in the role of a PM and start learning about key elements of designing products, but also will give you an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to get scrappy and build things from scratch— a huge plus for recruiters reviewing your resume, especially if you don't have prior product experience.

- 2) **Leverage your technical background by turning your technical experience into product improvements** - based on your engineering background working with a specific product, what are things you would change to focus on the customer's needs, or to help the business grow, reduce margins, etc.? If you're non-technical, familiarize yourself with how the development process works and identify what parts of the chain to improve.
- 3) **Act like a Product Manager** - Work with stakeholders to discuss the product roadmap and find ways to increase efficiency. Cold call customers to ask what the company could be doing better. Work on a side project like building out a new feature and see it from start to finish!
- 4) **Shadow a PM** - Go to meetings with Product Managers and understand the different roles and responsibilities. This can be incredibly helpful in understanding what expectations exist for PMs at a specific company. Include this experience on your resume if possible.
- 5) **Demonstrate your soft skills as well as your technical skills** - There are so many buzzwords that PMs want to hear when they're interviewing you; your soft skills matter just as much as your technical skills. These include:
  - a) Having a **growth mindset** - always willing to learn and improve
  - b) Being able to **work cross-functionally** among a variety of teams
  - c) Acting as an efficient **leader** and a strong proponent for your product (Why should you receive funding for your product? What's the impact of the product or feature you're in charge of?)
  - d) Focusing on the **customer experience to define the scope of a product**

 **Farrah's Note:** Don't let anyone fool you - you don't need to have an extensive technical background to be a PM at a tech company!

Being a PM was my dream role, but tech recruiters at on-campus recruiting events constantly told me I needed 5-7 years of technical experience to land a job as a PM. While that might have been true years ago, I can confidently say that 5-7 years of technical experience is not necessary to be an effective PM. A lot of PMs transition from consulting and business roles, or work in a technical role for 1-2 years before transitioning to Product Management. You do,

however, need to know how to answer high-level technical questions, which is mentioned in detail below.


## Getting Ready to Apply

The application process to become a PM begins well before you submit your resume. Your work experiences, interests, and projects help you build your profile as a prospective PM. You ideally want to touch on all the attributes above to cover your bases.

### Engineering

You need to show that you understand engineering problems and how to build things. Below is a plan to ramp up on how to work with engineering. (Note: this does not mean you need to be a programmer)

- **Today**
  - If you have little to no coding experience and don't know how a website is built, start a free online class on platforms such as [codecademy](#) or [freecodecamp](#)
- **In 3 months**
  - Participate in a hackathon (a 24 hour event in which you & a team build something). While you won't necessarily be coding the product, you can help in other ways by diving into design, figuring out how to present the product, or anything non-technical.
  - Hackathons are a crash-course in how to work with engineers. [Here's some hackathons coming up.](#)
- **In 6 months**
  - Build your own personal website, side project, or app

 **Sahil's Note:** Hackathons or a side project with a technical friend is my favorite way to get ramped up on engineering concepts. Nothing replaces working with someone on a real thing (and it's way more fun than taking online courses).

A side project could be literally anything you're interested in. [Here's a website](#) that my brother and I made to quickly order from coffee shops in Dallas. Little projects like these show your passion for building and experience building with engineers.

## Design

You need to understand how to craft a great experience for people using your product, which includes making design decisions. Here are some examples, from what constitutes [“good vs. bad” design](#) to [design principles](#).

- **Today**
  - Check out this [awesome blog](#) that covers small details that make a big difference
- **In 3 months**
  - [Take this free course](#) by Students Who Design
- **In 6 months**
  - Design your own personal website, side project, or app. [Figma](#) is a free resource to design and prototype.

## Business

It's important to be aware of your competitive landscape and trends within the tech industry. The state of the industry should influence how you make business decisions and shape your strategy and vision.

- **Today**
  - Read the free articles on [Stratechery](#)
- **In 3 months**
  - Listen to podcasts like [This Week in Startups](#) and [Y-Combinator](#) to learn about emerging companies and trends
  - Read [TechCrunch](#)
  - Read this compilation of [Internal Memos](#) to understand how past decisions at companies were made
- **In 6 months**
  - Read a couple of books about business/strategy (recommended reading below)
  - Pick a company and do your own strategic analysis using a framework (examples: Porter's Five Forces, Aggregation Theory)
  - Watch upcoming company keynotes (Apple, Facebook F8, Google I/O)

## Recruiting Process

### What do recruiters look for?

Recruiters look for the following attributes when considering people for Product Management Roles:

- Knowledge about the company and the product area/product for which you are interviewing
- Why you would like to specifically work at that company

- Your elevator pitch - why do you want to be a PM and what makes you qualified?
- Your previous experience that makes you a fit for a Product Management role
- Your LinkedIn is your brand - use it to share PM tips, your interest in Product Management, etc.



#### Farrah's Note:

1. When mentioning why you want to work at the specific company you're applying to, **don't read/memorize/copy+paste something verbatim from the company's website or Wikipedia.** After being involved with the recruiting team at my company to hire Product Managers from universities, I'm now able to decipher when someone is directly copying and pasting their answers to that question from another source, and it's a turn off! Show genuine interest after doing some research into the companies to show them exactly why you want to work for them.
2. Do not message PMs/recruiters at the company you're applying to by sending over your resume and asking them to "find a role suitable for [you]". Either set up a quick chat first so the recruiter or PM can get to know you, or if you're reaching out with internships or positions you're interested in, include the specific requisition numbers/positions you're applying to. Sell yourself!

### How can I make my application stand out?

1. **Talk about side projects** you've led that demonstrate your skills as a Product Manager. (Bonus: Do projects which have something in common with the company/product area you're applying to!)
2. **Be data-driven** when explaining why you made specific decisions.
3. **Network!** Find other product managers to learn more about the role or company they work at. Try to offer something before asking for time - this could be your case study!
4. **Give some insight into your technical background**, especially if you didn't major in engineering. PM recruiters want to see that you will be able to lead engineering teams well, so you need to be able to pick up a technical skill set quickly. (Maybe even get a Scrum Master certification or enroll in an engineering bootcamp if you don't have a technical background!)

### What does a PM resume look like?

1. Use **relevant, applicable buzzwords from the requisition posting** and **connect them to real outcomes you drove** - ex. "Agile", "cross-functional", "communication", "solve problems", "gather requirements"
2. Add an **objective** at the top of your resume with 1-2 sentences explaining why you're interested in Product Management or what makes you stand out



3. **Highlight projects that demonstrate your PM skills.** PM recruiters don't want to know all of the technical details of your software engineering projects, they want to see what you did that makes you capable of being a great PM - so include those details!
4. **Talk about both your soft and hard skills.**
  - a. **Soft skills** may include: Leadership, creativity, efficiency with making decisions, teamwork, communication
  - b. **Hard skills** may include: Familiarity with Agile methodologies, ability to use JIRA and other Atlassian tools, Salesforce, competitive landscaping, etc.

## Preparing for the Interview

### Types of Interviews

PM Interviews are something you can prepare for in advance, but you should add your own flair to your answers. It's obvious when you copy and paste a framework from a book or blog post. Don't be afraid to suggest creative solutions or focus on unique user-groups.

There are many types of interview questions, depending on the company. We recommend you search online for what kinds of questions the company you're interviewing likes to ask. [This link dives into the variety of questions](#). Below we'll outline the 2-3 types of questions we see most.

- Product Design/Strategy
  - This question tests your ability to understand a product, pick a couple of user segments to target that use the product, outline their problems, and choose a problem to solve.
    - Sometimes this is explicitly given by the interviewer (e.g. How would you make a teledoctor app for seniors?).
    - Sometimes it's entirely up to you (e.g. How would you improve Google Maps?)
    - Companies may also give you an assignment to present at your interview. This following is a real example from a tech company. [Here's](#) an example framework to use in your response.

*Pick a real cloud service that has launched in the past year. Put yourself in the shoes of that Product Manager one year prior to the launch giving a 3-minute pitch to the CEO. Be prepared to answer the following questions. Slides are optional.*

- *Who has what problem and what are you proposing we build in order to address it?*
- *Why should our company specifically be the one to invest in building this product? What are we uniquely positioned to offer the*

*customer, how does it disproportionately enhance the product portfolio or how will this differentiate vs key competitors?*

- *Are there any risks associated with the path you're proposing?*
- *How will success be measured post-rollout?*

- Once you've chosen a problem to solve, you should outline some solutions, prioritize a solution based on a framework, and walk through the ideal user experience, with tradeoffs.

- Behavioral


- This type of interview will be your chance to demonstrate your soft skills as well as your interest in the company. The types of questions you should be prepared for include the following:

- Why do you want to work at X company?
- Why do you want to become a Product Manager? What skills do you bring to the table that would make you stand out as a Product Manager?
- Personal Experiences (examples):
  - Describe a situation in which you acted as a Product Manager for your group or team
  - Describe how you have worked cross-functionally with many teams to achieve a common goal

- Each experience should aim to touch on one of the Product Manager attributes we listed at the beginning of this guide and your answers should reflect different experiences
- Focus on your leadership skills and experiences (bonus points if you can connect your experiences to PM skills), your drive, and your ability to work well in a team setting

- Technical

- Technical interviews can vary company to company
- It's a good idea to check out [Glassdoor](#) for a list of questions for the specific position you're applying to!

 **Farrah's Note:** During presentations or interviews that assess your Product Management skills, interviewers will often try to test you by seeing how deep into detail you can dive into a product. They may ask you to draw up system diagrams on the spot or repetitively ask you "Okay, but why?" about your decisions until you have nothing left to say. I've dealt with this at several interviews and it helps to be as deeply prepared as possible to defend your product decisions. Most of the time, **there's no right answer**. They just want to assess your thought process!

## Interview Resources

- Books
  - [Cracking the PM Interview](#)
  - [Decode and Conquer](#)
  - [Swipe to Unlock](#)
  - [The Design of Everyday Things](#)
  - [Product School](#)
- Example Questions
  - [StellarPeers](#)
  - [Exponent](#)
  - [Question Bank](#)

*For further questions please contact [Farrah Gulzar](#) or [Sahil Khoja](#).*

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