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PRODUCT OWNER

The Product Owner is a role in Scrum – an Agile Framework. As a member of the Scrum Team, they're responsible for optimising the value that agile teams deliver. Ultimately, this makes them accountable for delivery of the outcomes of products and services.

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WHAT IS A PRODUCT OWNER?

The Product Owner has a close and permanent relationship to one or more agile teams. They represent the views of many people – end-users, internal stakeholders, internal committees and even senior executives. They are the single point of decision-making regarding what work teams do now, and what they will do next. Clients of a product or service might change, a product's features might be delivered and then be retired, the elements of the service catalogue might come and go, but the Product Owner remains attached to the same teams.

EXPECTATIONS OF PRODUCT OWNERS

Develop and Communicate the Product's Goal

All products and services have goals. It's the Product Owner's responsibility to understand and communicate how their product achieves goals for the organisation, its stakeholders and its customers.

Manage the scope and delivery of value

Make decisions on what work gets done now, and what work gets done later. Understanding what is of value to the organisation and to clients is the way work gets prioritised. These decisions of the Product Owner are made transparent through the Product Backlog.

Manage stakeholder feedback

Fast feedback allows plans to change so that value is always delivered. The Product Owner manages feedback to build empathy and an understanding of their needs and then realise it through the Product Backlog.

KEY AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Manage the budget

- Invest in Sprints that will yield the right impacts and outcomes for the organisations, stakeholders and customers.
- Invest in features that will create specific outcomes and impacts, not deliverables.

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Measure value (OKRs/KPIs) early and often

- Measure impacts and outcomes of features implemented, not deliverables and activities.
- Measure outcomes and impacts using frameworks like Evidence Based Management (EBM).

Engage stakeholders, clients, and customers

- The highest priority is to satisfy the all types of clients through early and continuous delivery of valued products and services.
- Good customer experience is reinforced by engaging them to provide feedback early and often. This will enable the Scrum Team to continuously improve product delivery and the quality of their products.
- For the Product Owner to succeed, people must respect his or her decisions regarding the work that the Scrum Team does. These decisions should be visible in the content and ordering of the Product Backlog.
- A functional product that is fit-for-purpose is the primary measure of progress. A product or outcome only half-done is of no value to a client, users or stakeholders.

Work as a member of the Scrum Team

- The Product Owner is an important part of the Scrum Team and has critical working relationships with the Scrum Master and with Developers.
- The best solutions emerge from self-managing teams. Help the whole team build products around motivated individuals working as a single team, and give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The Product Owner is accountable for the work done by the Developers, not the Scrum Master.
- No one is allowed to tell the team to work from a different set of outcomes.

Manage the Product Backlog

- The Product Owner is responsible for the Product Backlog, including its content, availability, and ordering. Ensure the Product Backlog is visible and transparent to everyone.
- The Product Backlog is an ordered list of everything that might be needed in the product and is the single source of any changes to be made to the product. It constantly evolves as changes are identified to meet the needs of users, clients and stakeholders.
- A mature, productive and efficient agile team understands its product and the Product Backlog just as well as its Product Owner.

Work closely with the Scrum Master

- Work closely with the Scrum Master to help cause change that increases the productivity of the Scrum Team so they can deliver more to stakeholders with higher quality, less effort and less waste.
- Elicit the support of the Scrum Master to help stakeholders understand and enact Scrum and empirical product development.

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KEY OUTCOMES

- Prioritisation of work by value. Value-based metrics regarding delivery.
- Agile teams always deliver the most valued items out of the Product Backlog each Sprint.
- The Scrum Team has an Increment of work that meets the Definition of Done each Sprint – a concrete stepping stone toward the Product Goal.
- Stakeholder, clients and end-users have visibility of the status of items they have asked for (has it started?) and when it is forecast to be delivered.
- An understanding of the capacity and economic cost of the Team's work.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Take responsibility for the success of the product. A good Product Owner makes the decisions about the product and doesn't act as a proxy for another manager.
- Explain to your stakeholders why you're delivering using Agile. Agile isn't a hype, nor is it something you 'do'. It's a mindset. It's a set of values and principles which guide you. Scrum is the framework that will help them structure feedback and see results early and often. The Scrum Master is responsible for assisting the Product Owner with this activity.
- Simplicity – the art of maximising the amount of work not done – is essential to "building the right product" and "building it right".
- Understand that more analysis doesn't (necessarily) make the product better. Releasing features and getting feedback from their use is a faster way to understand what people will use.
- Be 'product oriented' instead of 'project oriented'.

COMMON OBSTACLES TO AVOID

- The Product Owner is one person, not a committee. The Product Owner may represent the desires of a committee, stakeholders and multiple-clients' needs, in the Product Backlog, but those wanting to change a Product Backlog item's priority must address the Product Owner.
- Watch out for turning the Product Owner into a proxy for someone else who makes the decisions.
- Manage delivery of work through the Product Backlog over handing out work, writing backlog items for specific individuals, or trying pre-determining how much team members should complete to meet a predetermined fixed, future milestone.

ABOUT ZEN EX MACHINA

Zen Ex Machina (ZXM) provides independent and objective agile coaching and consulting, founded in organisational psychology, culture and change management, to help leaders succeed in their organisations. Ranging in scope from a short strategy session to full agile operating models, ZXM services connect you directly with experienced, certified agile practitioners who apply expert insight to your specific strategic and operational challenges.

For additional information, go to zenexmachina.com and agileiq.com