The Trajectory of a PM Career

Brought to you by

PRODUCTS THAT COUNT



The Trajectory of a PM Career

Much like the products we build, our careers as product managers (PMs) have their ebbs and flows. It's easy to get caught up in critical milestones when looking at a career trajectory in product management. Yes, it's essential to know how to earn a promotion or accept a new opportunity at another company. However, it's also necessary to focus on the day-to-day development that will get us to that point.

Seventy-five percent of PMs have been on the job for less than two years. That means the majority of us product managers in the workforce have great opportunities for career development!

Knowing what a product management career looks like is a crucial step in leveling up our careers. That's why we sat down with product leader Jackie Bavaro, who has co-authored two books on the subject.

Jackie Bavaro is the co-author of Cracking the PM Interview and Cracking the PM Career. She is also currently an advisor to Asana, where she was their first product manager. Before Asana, Jackie's product career included stops at Google helping to build Google Search (Local, Video, Images) and Google APIs. Earlier, she was at Microsoft working on Microsoft SharePoint.

Jackie Bavaro
Asana, Head of Product Managment

How the PM career changes as you advance through it

Early on in our careers, as PMs, we may take a singular focus: getting progressively better at shipping products. While that is a vital part of being a good PM, **a product career is not quite so linear**. The PM career is more of a zigzagging path that includes three phases.

The first phase of a PM career is the ability mentioned above to ship products, but that phase has a ceiling. As PMs, once we've gotten as good as we can possibly get at shipping products it's time to shift focus to product strategy.

Product strategy is phase two of the PM career. See what actions will be impactful and shape a long-term vision for the product team. Additionally, as PMs, we begin to learn how to align our teams around achieving

that impactful, long-term vision. It won't always be easy.

"It feels terrible as a PM because we're used to being top of our game," explained Bavaro. "All of a sudden, we're finding out that we've messed things up again. So it's worth it to be prepared to have that dip again."

Adopting the Growth Mindset and focusing on continuous improvement will help keep our heads above water and get to phase three of the PM career: organizational excellence. Just like each of the previous two phases, it will take work to be great at this phase.

So what does that look like?

Here are some of the questions we need to learn how to answer:

- **How do you build a high-performing team?**
- **How do you recruit people?**
- **How do we coach them and develop PMs? And how do we set up the processes?**

As PMs, we need to develop and implement frameworks and structures so that everybody can do their best work. That might mean going and resolving some cross-departmental conflict, coming up with better templates for our team to use, or doing a reorg.

As we reach phase three, there's a need to elevate and delegate to the rest of our teams and organizations as a whole. Remember, it won't feel good when we're not excelling at the task at hand. Bavaro offered some advice to PMs as they find themselves in the dips of these phases.

"See the struggles as a success," suggested Bavaro. "Know that we're bad at it because it's a new skill. Be excited to see that skill improve and get better over time. Recognize that's a sign that we have advanced to the level where now we're facing these challenging problems."

> **It feels terrible as a PM because we're used to being top of our game. All of a sudden, we're finding out that we've messed things up again. So it's worth it to be prepared to have that dip again."**

> **See the struggles as a success. Know that we're bad at it because it's a new skill. Be excited to see that skill improve and get better over time. Recognize that's a sign that we have advanced to the level where now we're facing these challenging problems.**

How to Navigate Opportunities for Advancement In Your Career

It's important to stay sharp on all things product management as we're building new skills to advance throughout our careers.

For PMs who want to keep current and perhaps even begin to shape and drive the product conversation, here are a few tips:

01

Follow people who talk about product on Twitter: product people, designers, engineers. **Stay up to date with what's happening**, discover the buzz on new products coming out, and get people's analysis of product. "I think it is always fascinating hearing about different approaches to running product teams."

02

Join one of the many product communities, join in on their conversation, and participate in their events. We're obviously biased towards Products That Count, because it's large and global, but there are some more niche options as well. "I'm a big fan of the Women in Product community. I think that one's really helpful."

03

Seek out your peers. "Look for people who are at the same level as me and one level higher because those are those people who will have sort of the most salient advice."

Any of us would be grateful to feel like there are growth opportunities within an organization. Depending on the company, they may or may not exist.

The companies' names, especially a FAANG (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google) company or another name brand such as Microsoft on your resume, can help you get that next opportunity.

A pattern that works well is spending three or four years at one of these big companies. Focus on building a network and absorbing all of the best practices. Learn all of the PM processes that those big tech companies have been refining over the years.

Then, after three or four years, look to join a fast-growing company. One that's hiring a lot and is in the middle of a hyper-growth. Those companies offer opportunities to take on more extensive responsibilities. That helps to grow fast.

There's also the internal conversation about whether the name brand company is more valuable to have on a resume versus a better position at a smaller company. Understanding which factor is more important can help to create a career roadmap.

"For PMs just breaking into product management without the safety net of a top-tier university, then a big company will offer a much better one," clarified Bavaro.

How to Reach the C-Suite

Earlier, we shared the three stages of the product management career. However, there's one more essential element for us PMs with designs of reaching the C-Suite.

That last element? It's fit. **A PM's fit with a company and the rest of the executive team is critical at the executive level.**

"For the Head of Product role, the entire job must be thinking about the product org and how to make that as good as possible," stated Bavaro. "However, running the product org is maybe 50-75 percent of the job. A lot of it is being a member of the executive team and participating in decisions that steer the entire company."

> **For the Head of Product role, the entire job must be thinking about the product org and how to make that as good as possible. However, running the product org is maybe 50-75 percent of the job. A lot of it is being a member of the executive team and participating in decisions that steer the entire company.**

Beyond fit, speaking the C-Suite language is imperative for any product professional looking to reach that level. As PMs, we start to hear what that sounds like when we're reporting to the Head of Product. It's important for us to pay attention when we have the opportunity to be in cross-functional meetings.

"It's a chance to understand what's important to other parts of the operational side of a business and company as a whole," offered Bavaro.

> **It's a chance to understand what's important to other parts of the operational side of a business and company as a whole.**

In order to advance in our careers, **we need to learn to value all of the different departments and understand them**. Get to know their goals and constraints. For example, learn how vital response time is for people who answer user tickets. See how they pay attention to customer satisfaction, how many tickets they can get through in a day, and how quickly people get responses.

"At a startup, go so far as to understand how fundraising works. Get to know the next fundraising milestones," suggested Bavaro. "Learn what the company thinks it needs to demonstrate at that next milestone."

The good news is that as product managers, **we train to learn new things and to be cross-functional**. It's already a part of our job. If we continue to hone those skills, seek out mentorship, and maintain a growth mindset, we should all be able to take the reigns of our careers and earn the jobs we want.

What Can Be Done Today (Or Tomorrow If It's Late) To Advance PM Careers

As PMs, there are actions that can be taken, and factors within our control, to help advance our careers. Here are three to begin with:

01

Find ways to join, shape and drive the product conversation. This helps to stand out with the individuals responsible for promotions at a company or hiring managers at others. To join the product conversation, curate content on social feeds. Retweet other PMs who are offering advice. We can take it a step further and shape the conversation by commenting with well-informed opinions on blogs and social media, tweeting out advice from our own experiences, and participating in panels or moderating events. As PMs, we earn the right to drive the product conversation by taking a stand on topics we believe in, writing articles, speaking at events in order to stand out as a product leader.

02

Treat ourselves like the products we build. We need to take the time to develop a roadmap for ourselves and the careers we want to have. Maintain a growth mindset and see every challenge in our careers as an opportunity for growth. If we build out our skillsets, it will be recognized by those around (and above) us. When it comes time to look for our next job or interview for a promotion, PMs must embrace the interview process. That's how we'll find our personal product-market fits within an organization.

03

We need to be ourselves! Hiring managers want to know what makes us as PMs stand out from the rest. It's not always going to be about the college we went to our the companies we worked at on our resumes. So many PMs have done stops FAANG (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google) companies. We need to know what superpowers as PMs we possess that makes us special. It could help to ask a direct reports what it is that makes us stand out as a great product manager. Or, for those of us with trust in our self awareness, take stock of it ourselves.

Take some time and reflect on these three steps. Make some notes if need be. These are simple steps that can help us as we move throughout our careers as product managers to identify key milestones and achieve our goals.

PRODUCTS THAT COUNT

About Us

Products That Count is the most influential Product Acceleration Platform in the world.

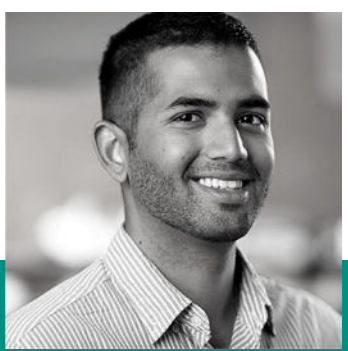
Empowers 300,000+ PMs via:

- 100+ events globally each year
- Thousands of videos, podcasts and articles online
- Best practices from Netflix product VP, Box CPO and more
- A focus on answering the question, “What makes a great product?”
- Its commitment to inclusion and increasing diversity in product











Products That Count is the original and most influential product acceleration platform in the world. Almost 300,000 product managers globally read, watch, attend and listen to our 3,000+ free blog posts, videos, webinars and podcasts.

C/VP-level product executives such as Netflix Product VP, Coinbase CPO, and Box CPO share best practices and raise their profile at our curated product salons, podcast show and mastermind circles. Leading brands such as Autodesk and Capital One join as corporate members to turn their product teams into a competitive advantage. Hyper-growth companies like Amplitude have generated 10X ROI from marketing partnerships.

Learn more at **productsthatcount.com**

Brought to
you by

PRODUCTS
THAT
COUNT