

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

WHY PRODUCT MANAGEMENT TRAINING FAILS

**FLIP THE CLASSROOM TO IMPROVE YOUR
TRAINING RESULTS**

from Product Growth Leaders



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*Personally I'm always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.—Winston Churchill,
British politician*

Product management is so hot right now! It's one of the fastest growing professional disciplines according to recent surveys of "Hot Jobs."

Every day, we see posts on how to get into product management. Yet we also see befuddled product managers with little guidance on how to actually perform the work they were so anxious to get.

An anonymous poster on Reddit wrote, "I've been struggling to keep my head above water. I have too many tasks on my plate and no guidance on how to execute on them. **I'm terrified I'll be fired because I don't know what I should be doing.**"

This is a failure of management: expecting work from an untrained professional. It's also a failure of today's training and professional development methods.

1.

THE GOLDEN ERA OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT TRAINING

"I like to do all the talking myself. It saves time, and prevents arguments." — Oscar Wilde, Irish writer and poet

The past 20 years have been a seemingly golden era for professional development in product management.

Hundreds of thousands of professionals have participated in product management training. Product management is now on the curriculum at major business and computer science programs. There are myriad options for in-person, on-line, and degree programs for anyone interested in product management training.

There are many, many courses available in product management in every possible medium: free videos, on-demand courses, and online and onsite seminars. Most are superficial, focusing on tactical “backlog grooming” and other technical mechanics of product development once performed by business analysts.

Unfortunately, most product management courses are lacking any aspect of strategy; they ignore identifying markets and determining which personas to serve, building the financials documents necessary to justify investment, prioritizing work based on business value, and go-to-market

planning to guide a product from the labs into the buyer's hands.

Yet despite the explosion in the number of professionals trained in product management and the available options for that training, traditional training has not produced a material impact on the practice's improvement and growth.

- Product management is clearly defined and understood in only 21% of organizations;[i]
- Processes, roles definition, and overall alignment are undefined or ill-defined;[ii] and
- 47% of product professionals identified process as the biggest challenge for product management in their company, and 51% said their product management process is not well-defined.[iii]

These issues with process, roles, and alignment show up in poor results, with research identifying that 72% of all new products developed fail to meet their revenue targets.[iv]

For the product management profession to improve these results, professional development needs to evolve.

In 2021, Product Growth Leaders researched the current state of product management training. We explored the best practices of adult learning and professional development.

Our conclusions reveal how professional development of product management needs to evolve.

2.

SKILL GAPS IN PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

"80% of problems in companies can be attributed to poor communication. The other 25% can be attributed to poor math skills." — Ronald Sathoff, Primary Intelligence

Company leaders complain, "I've spent thousands and thousands on training for my product management and development teams, but I've seen no material impact on the business results."

We surveyed product leaders to understand current professional development practices for product managers. We explored what product leaders value and where today's professional development falls short.

We asked them to consider five aspects of professional skills and rate, using a scale of 1 to 10, the importance of that skill for their organization, and their team members command of the skill:

- Product Management Fundamentals
- Business and Strategy
- Project Management
- Technical Skills and
- Soft Skills.

We were surprised by the skill gaps we found. In short, **today's product professionals are underperforming** in each area. Twenty years into the supposed golden era of product

management professional development, the results are dismal.

Competence and Importance scores were calculated for each skill based on the percent of responses with a rating of 7 or more.

Each of these five areas had negative gaps (“Command of skills” are consistently less than “Importance of Skill”).

- 86% of product leaders who rated Fundamentals important rated their team's command at only 41%, a gap of -45.5.
- Business and Strategy skills were important to 91% of product leaders, but they rated their team's command in this area as only 32%, a gap of 59%.

Either the current investment in product management training is not enough, or those product management training methods fail to deliver long-term value.


We conclude that the answer is both.

3

CHRONIC ISSUES WITH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"Apply people where their skills and talent can really shine. That's what management is all about." — Tom DeMarco, author, Peopleware

To better understand how to improve results, we researched professional development as a practice and found that it is not only the product management profession that is struggling.

In "Where Companies Go Wrong with Learning and Development,"  Steve Glaveski argues that the \$359 billion spend globally on training was simply not worthwhile and shared some eye-opening statistics.

- Only 30% of employees report they have mastery of the skills needed to do their jobs, as illustrated by the anonymous Reddit post above;
- Only 12% of employees apply new skills learned in training programs to their jobs; and
- Only 25% believe that training measurably improved performance.

The statistics are astounding but not truly surprising. We have heard similar results in our conversations with product management educators, coaches, and leaders.

How many product professionals look forward to yet-another lecture on product management?

One of the main reasons for the poor results of adult learning found by Glaveski is the reality of how adults actually learn.

German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus found that if new information isn't applied, people forget about 75% of the information after six days. To compound that, the Association of Training and Development (ATD) reports that 90% of trainers lack a learning transfer strategy.

Glaveski's recommendations to improve results include:

- ✓ Focus on the core of what is needed to learn;
- ✓ Give short lessons; and
- ✓ Apply learnings to real-world situations immediately.

How do you apply these insights to training for your product management teams?

4

FLIP THE CLASSROOM TO IMPROVE THE RESULTS OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT TRAINING

*Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember.
Involve me, and I learn.— Xun Kuang, a Confucian
philosopher*

Traditional product management training is not meeting the objectives of today's organizations as shown above. And it's not just product management. Lecture-style training may be an effective way to **transmit** information but it's the least effective way to **educate**.

Yet the majority of product management training today is lecture-based, regardless of delivery method—on-demand, online, or onsite.

Lecture without application is not learning.

After all, you cannot learn to ride a bike from a video.

Most traditional training options incorporate only limited case studies and few team exercises. Their focus is primarily on information transfer, not on skills development.

The typical training format is 80% lecture and 20% application (at most). Online courses are 100% lecture, usually with some poorly framed “work on your own” exercises. Few of today's product management courses are designed to apply the concepts and methods to your products, markets, and organizations.

Malcolm Knowles, in his theory of andragogy (the method and practice of teaching adult learners), made four assumptions about the design of learning:

- ✓ Adults need to know why they need to learn something;
- ✓ Adults need to learn experientially;
- ✓ Adults approach learning as problem-solving; and
- ✓ Adults learn best when the topic is of immediate value.

Product Management training needs to shift from lectures and war stories to facilitation and application coaching. For that matter, the same can be said for all professional development—whether for product management, technical fields like engineering, sales professionals, and so on.

Adult learning requires a more engaging approach. In short, “flip the classroom.” Short lessons, applied immediately. Move from “sage on the stage” to “guide on the side.”

Professional development should follow the **L-E-A-P™** approach to learning. In each workshop, begin with a **LESSON** on the topic, **EXTEND** the understand with a tool or template, **APPLY** the concept to your products and markets in a working session, and perform a **PEER REVIEW** of the final deliverable.

After all, you don't learn to drive a car from hearing stories about racing.

5

KEEP IT GOING WITH PRODUCT OPS

As an organization grows and there are more and more individuals in product roles, we see a disconnect of both roles and methods amongst the myriad teams. One team does it one way, another team does it another. Each team uses different templates and tools from different sources.

And that's where ProductOps comes in.

ProductOps is a specialized role within product or product management that normalizes the function across all products and services. The ProductOps goal is to standardize and optimize.

The “Ops” designator is already used in many other departments: Sales, marketing, and development all have Ops roles. The idea is to systemize the department instead of relying on each team or individual to develop and implement their own best practices.

ProductOps examines and standardizes processes with common templates and tools. It helps perform data analytics and acquisition and develops methods for meaningful engagement with customers and potential customers.

Here are some ways that ProductOps can benefit your product teams:

- **Define roles and responsibilities.** Let's have a single definition for each title and what they do. For instance, who should do win/loss interviews, analysis, and reporting? ProductOps can either coach teams in the best practices or perform certain capabilities (such as win loss analysis) as a service.

- **Standardize methods and artifacts.** What templates do we use? How should we prioritize business opportunities? What's the best approach for backlog grooming? ProductOps builds a “product playbook” of standard templates and tools, adapted to the special needs of your business.
- **Wrangle corporate and product data.** With so much operational data available, how can a new product manager make sense of it all? ProductOps can be the expert on data that's available and how it can provide insights to product decisions.
- **Guide and curate market and customer research.** How do we set up customer interviews? Where do we store and share our insights? How can we execute experiments such as A/B tests?
- **Evaluate and manage departmental tools.** What roadmapping tool is best? Do we store product information in Jira? How do we use Teams or Slack? Instead of multiple tools, ProductOps identifies departmental needs, evaluates available tools, and makes a selection. ProductOps then manages the tool and trains team members.

The danger is that ProductOps may be perceived as responsible for doing everything that other product management roles don't want to do. ProductOps is a service to all product management roles but neither a boss nor an admin.

Product teams need standard tools, a common language, and training on product management best practices. ProductOps adapts industry practices to create an organizational “playbook” of methods.

By examining at what works (and what doesn't) across all product teams, ProductOps identifies successful approaches and helps each team adopt the organization's best practices.

ENDNOTES

- [i] 2020 Product Management Festival Benchmark Report.
- [ii] 2019 SiriusDecisions Product Management Priorities Survey.
- [iii] 280 Group.
- [iv] CB Insights.
- [v] October 2, 2019, Harvard Business Review.

More statistics on trends in product management in <https://www.productboard.com/blog/golden-age-of-product-management-trends/>

See also <https://www.businessinsider.com/best-jobs-future-growth-2019-3>

WHAT'S NEXT

When choosing a course of study for your product management team, be sure the courseware contains the relevant concepts for your team members' experience level.

Shift the bulk of lesson time from lecture and stories to discussion and application.

Remember that more engagement means better learning. Create cohorts that work together during or immediately after the lesson to apply the method to their products.

When seeking training for product professionals, consider which approach is best for your team. Bringing your team together for a few days is great for team building. Sending the team through a multi-week series of lessons provides them with time to apply the lessons to their products while fitting into an already-busy schedule. Consider a blended approach using on-demand, online, and onsite lessons with on-going application coaching.

Flip the classroom and improve the results of your product management training investment.

Learn more about our approach and download the comparison sheet at:

<https://productgrowthleaders.com/flip-the-classroom>

COMPARE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPTIONS

Offering	Vendor 1	Vendor 2	Vendor 3
Active learning with minimal lecture			
Integrated coaching with training			
After-training coaching and consulting			
Stakeholder briefing included			
Peer community			

ABOUT PRODUCT GROWTH LEADERS

Our belief in the importance of application in learning is so strong that we incorporated these concepts in **Fundamentals of Managing Products**, our foundational product management training program. Each program combines lessons with coaching, theory supported by application.

Product Growth Leaders guides emerging product leaders with coursework on strategic product management, a networking community of product professionals, and research on best practices in product management and marketing for technology-based organizations.

Learn more about Product Growth Leaders at <https://www.productgrowthleaders.com/why-us>

