

Future-Proof Your Product Management Skills

By Clifton Gilley

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Initiatives: Product Leadership

Product management skills and expectations have undergone massive changes in the past five years. This evolution will continue, and product managers and teams who want to gain an edge now to be relevant in the future must adapt to these changing dynamics and focus on acquiring new skills.

Overview

Key Findings

- The skills generally attributed to high-performing product managers have changed significantly over the past decade.
- As product teams become more data-informed, customer-centric and outcome-oriented, the need for technical skills has diminished and the need for business and leadership skills has increased.
- Product management teams are increasingly tasked with taking a more “whole product” view of the customer experience, requiring different skills from an execution-oriented focus.

Recommendations

Product managers in technology and service providers who are looking to establish or maintain leadership in the product management profession must:

- Expand the functional skills deemed essential to membership in the product team by abandoning the traditional Venn diagram of product skills (business/technology/customer) in favor of a broader perspective.
- Restructure the team to focus on a broad set of skills covered by specialist roles balancing the needs of the team as a whole, rather than generalists attempting to “do everything.”

- Increase the relevance of the product team within the organization by focusing skills around a whole-product view of customer experience and business outcomes over internal business outputs.

Analysis

The product management profession is a relatively young one in the world of technology, having really only been established as a focused discipline in the past 20 to 30 years. As the role of technology solutions has increased in our society over that time, the role has gone through many shifts and evolutionary steps to become what it is today. And, faced with new tools, capabilities and a deeper focus on customer outcomes over business outputs, the profession continues to evolve. The product manager of 2025 will look very different from the product manager in 2020, who in turn looks very different from the product manager of 2015. While the skills and abilities that define success in the past will remain relevant, they must be built upon with renewed focus and attention to outcomes over outputs for future performance.

We can see this evolution demonstrated by the key skills described in Table 1, split between “soft” interpersonal/management skills and “hard” technical skills.

Table 1: Evolution of Soft and Hard Skills for Product Management

	2015	2020	2025
Soft Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creativity ■ Time management ■ Vision ■ Collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Leadership ■ Communication ■ Analytical and critical thinking ■ Leading through influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Storytelling ■ Empathy – internal and external ■ Whole-product experience ■ Strategic alignment
Hard Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Market research ■ UI/UX design ■ MRDs and tech specs ■ Data modeling ■ Business analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ AI/ML ■ Data analysis ■ Prioritization ■ User stories ■ Business operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Data insights ■ Discovery and validation ■ Customer value proposition ■ OKR definition ■ Outcome ownership

AI = artificial intelligence; ML = machine learning; MRD = market requirements document; OKR = objective and key result; UI = user interface; UX = user experience

Source: Gartner (July 2021)

Specifically, the skills that Gartner sees growing in relevance toward 2025 are:

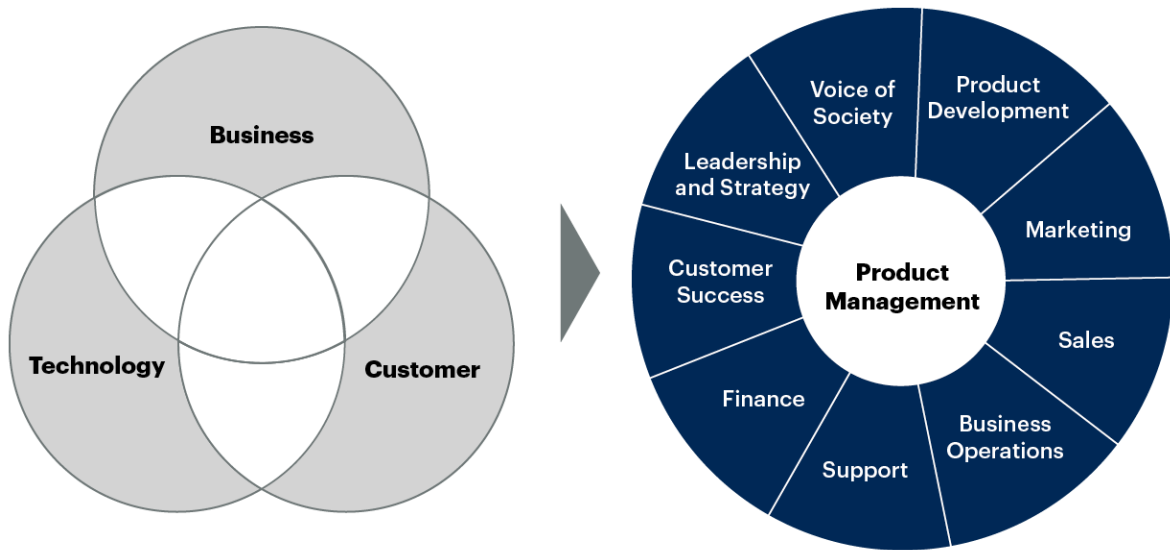
- **Soft Skills:**
 - **Storytelling** – For both internal and external audiences, influence comes through compelling storytelling and leading all audiences from idea to value.
 - **Empathy – Internal/External** – Being able to deeply understand the motivations of customers and stakeholders allows product managers to best tune their influence and goals to align with those to whom and through whom they deliver value.
 - **Whole-Product Experience** – “Product” is more than just the “thing being delivered;” the entire experience of a customer from initial discovery, through purchasing and implementation, all the way to retirement must be understood and orchestrated by the product team.
 - **Strategic Alignment** – As product management takes a more active ownership role in product strategy, they are better positioned to ensure alignment across the product portfolio of the organization as well as with higher-level business strategy.

- **Hard Skills:**
 - **Data Insights** – Far more important than understanding how to collect and mine data, deriving data insights through the use of tooling and data science provides the factual basis for empathy and compelling storytelling.
 - **Discovery and Validation** – As product managers delegate the oversight of tactical execution to a product owner role on the team, product managers can more effectively focus on engaging with the market and customer to discover valuable problems and validate proposed solutions.
 - **Customer Value Projection** – Renewing focus on customer outcomes and lifetime value shifts the perspective on how companies engage with their market and customers; product managers using data-informed tools and processes are a key component of this shift.
 - **OKR Definition** – OKRs become even more complex when teams are tasked with shifting focus to customer outcomes over business outputs. Product managers sitting in the center of the organizational hub need to take a leadership role in their definition, management and tracking.
 - **Outcome Ownership** – As the thinking of product management advances from merely focusing on internal, business-derived outputs, the need to truly own the outcomes that the customers are achieving becomes the most important skill.

This evolution of skills challenges the traditional Venn diagram of customer, technology and business, and supports a much broader, more specific, cross-domain view of the types of skills that product managers need to demonstrate in their work. An example of this shift is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Changing the Venn Diagram for Product Management

Changing the Venn Diagram for Product Management



Source: Gartner
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Gartner

Background and Context

Looking back to 2015, many of the skills that were valued in product management roles were technical and execution-oriented – positioning the product manager as beholden to the interests and needs of engineering and development teams. In many organizations, product management was viewed primarily as an input into the tactical execution of priorities determined by others – a waiter taking orders and delivering them to the short-order cook who did all of the hard work.

Moving to a more current view, represented by the 2020 column of Table 1, we see a profession in transition – some key hard skills still lean into the tactical delivery of features and capabilities. However, we see a step toward more leadership, planning and data analysis efforts, as well as a focus on understanding the underlying operations of the business.

This shift is reflected in job descriptions that are posted online. An analysis of Gartner’s TalentNeuron job postings data shows the following skills among the top 10 increasing skills on a multiyear basis (from July 2017 through July 2019 versus July 2019 through July 2021):

- Ideation (+39%, included in 6% of job postings)
- Data-driven (+25%, included in 9% of job postings)
- Customer feedback (+22%, included in 6% of job postings)
- Empathy (+19%, included in 5% of job postings)

As we look forward to 2025, Gartner expects this trend to continue, with product managers and product teams transitioning to full ownership of their product strategy and delivering valuable customer outcomes. This involvement will reflect the unique value proposition of the profession as the primary source of customer-oriented data related to discovery and validation of valuable customer and market problems. It will also reflect a broader perspective on what the product entails, from the narrow view of product as the thing being built to a broader view of the whole-product experience throughout the customer's engagement with the product.

Product managers must proactively examine and curate every aspect of the customer's experience, from discovery into adoption through use and on until retirement. They must fearlessly seek out previously unknown patterns in usage and other data from which they can extract insights to inform the strategic direction of their products and their organization.

The Impact

The first and most important impact of this evolution is on the skill set that employers should be looking for in new hires and growing in their existing teams, represented in the list of 2025 skills in Table 1. This begins by expanding the vocabulary used to describe the skills and talents that separate an exceptional product manager from the pack. But it also needs to follow through into how the role is defined, how a team is created with differing specialties and what a career track looks like for someone entering the product team. See [Product Manager Insight: Changes to Product Team Organization and Approaches for 2025](#).

Far too many organizations have a simple seniority-based career progression, rather than one based on the development of new skills or expansion of authority within the product organization. Dissolving the traditional Venn diagram and replacing it with a more complete picture of relevant skills allows teams to identify where they are strongest and weakest, and optimize team composition, development and hiring to fill any gaps they face. This further leads into specialization of the roles within product management – not every individual team member will excel in every space required of the team – different members will necessarily focus on parts of the whole. While the **team** must cover every capability outlined in Table 1, the **individuals** may specialize in one or more areas.

Also important is the companywide acceptance that the role continues to evolve, and the skills that allow product managers to succeed now are not those from the past, nor will they be those leveraged in the future. As the product manager role becomes more focused on outcomes and strategic planning, skills such as storytelling, empathy and alignment become keys to success – replacing more tactical considerations that may fall to product owner or product operations roles. See [Product Managers Can No Longer Ignore Customer Outcomes](#).

Similarly, hard skills that product managers must master have shifted away from the tactical support of execution by design, engineering and development teams, and are becoming more oriented toward supporting strategic, data-informed product planning aligned with business objectives and customer outcomes. This is a crucial component of the transformation of the role into truly bringing the “voice of the customer” and an “outside-in” perspective to the business. The more actual customer and usage data from which the product manager can derive insights and tell compelling stories, the stronger the tie between the product and customer success becomes.

Product managers and product teams looking to gain or maintain their edge in the profession moving toward 2025 must:

- Identify personal and intrateam skills gaps against the 2020 and 2025 skill models presented above, and make plans to fill those gaps through specialization, training or new hires in the coming years.
- Dispose of seniority-based career progression and focus instead on the breadth and depth that individual contributors bring to the team in determining product management career paths.
- Push for greater ownership of product strategy and a whole-product perspective of when, where and how customers are deriving value from their experiences.

- Transform the hard skills expectations of product managers and product teams away from tactical, execution-oriented skills toward strategic, customer-oriented skills such as data science and true discovery and validation.

Conclusion

Product management teams must evolve in synchronicity with the profession around them. Stagnation is not an option and only reinforces classic views of the product management role as a generalist rather than a “master of product.” Teams that look to the skills and talents that will power the profession in the future are best positioned to succeed in driving valuable customer outcomes rather than merely meet business output metrics.

Evidence

This analysis is built in part on employment data pulled from Gartner TalentNeuron in July 2021. Gartner TalentNeuron is the premium end-to-end labor market intelligence solution combining real-time insights from trusted global data sources, deep research and expert advisors to guide decisions on location, talent and competition. For more information, see Gartner TalentNeuron: Trusted Labor Market Insights.

Recommended by the Author

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[Product Management Must Take Back the Role of Product Owner](#)

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[Aligning Product Responsibilities – Don't Forget the Organization's Culture](#)

[Competitive Landscape: Product Management Tools](#)

[Product Manager Insight: Changes in Product Data and Insights Through 2025](#)

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