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# **Remove Product Legacy Features to Reduce Complexity**

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## Remove Product Legacy Features to Reduce Complexity

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Initiatives: Product Life Cycle Management

Many B2B solutions begin as focused solutions to specific problems but lose focus over time, adding capabilities tangential to the original value. Product managers must constantly revisit their products to ensure that legacy features do not unduly drain focus and diminish the customer experience.

### Overview

#### Key Findings

- Nearly every incremental addition to a product requires additional short- and long-term investment, both the introduction and the maintenance of such capabilities.
- When B2B solutions become overburdened with added-value functionality, the breadth of capabilities and sometimes competing features raise the cognitive load of the user trying to achieve their outcomes.
- Many companies hesitate to reduce feature sets or remove capabilities from products out of a fear that by doing so they will lose customers and revenue.

#### Recommendations

Product managers engaged in life cycle management of their existing products must:

- Identify product capabilities that have outlived their usefulness or which no longer target the optimal users and use cases by leveraging product analytics and other usage data.
- Increase the usability of their products by regularly reviewing and revising the user experience to minimize legacy workflows, features or capabilities and refocusing on those customer journeys best aligned to the current optimal user and their business outcomes.

- Soften the blow of retiring features by creating and executing a standard plan to communicate changes to feature sets far enough ahead so that customers can prepare for and accommodate such changes.

## Introduction

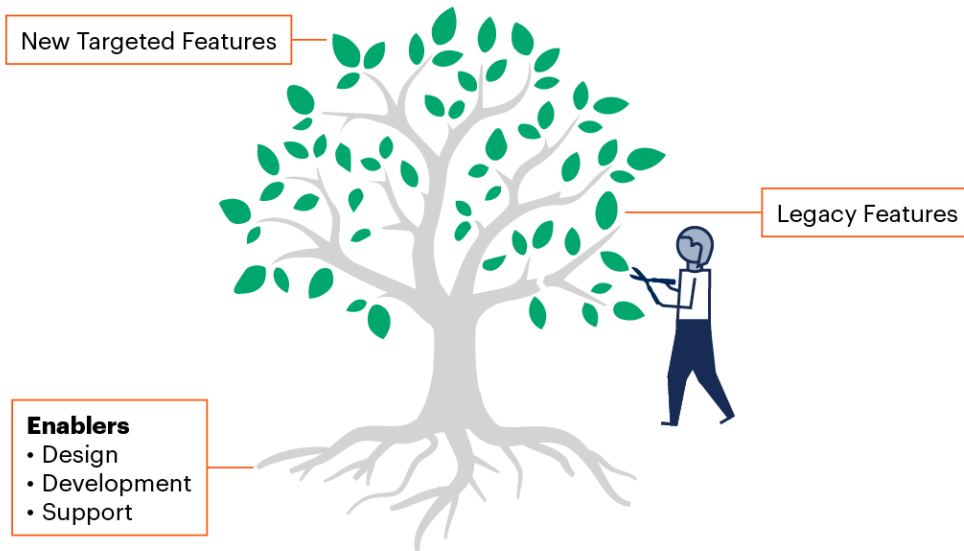
B2B products often begin their life as specific solutions to specific problems for a specific target user. As time goes by, expansion of that value proposition necessarily expands capabilities, which target new and emergent problems to solve and new users to solve them for. Unfortunately for most companies, the reverse is rarely the case – while features, functions and capabilities are frequently added to their product, rarely are any of these removed from the product.

To maintain a healthy product, product managers must constantly be tending to their garden – removing the “dead wood” of unused features, unsupported users and one-off capabilities used by past customers. Failure to properly manage the product garden leaves products struggling under an unnecessary load of feature and technical debt. This in turn creates financial disruptions due to maintenance and commercial disruptions and takes time, energy and focus away from expanding the core competencies of the product.

It's inevitable in large enterprise B2B solutions that features outside the core and distinctive competency of the product have crept in over time. Products pivot in new directions, leaving old personas to die on the vine. Sales efforts push one-off solutions to get deals signed, which eventually go to pasture when the client exits. Old technologies remain in the plumbing because they “just work,” even though it takes many hours of technical attention to keep them properly flowing.

Figure 1 shows how legacy features can drain resources, preventing new, better-targeted features from thriving.

Figure 1: Pruning Legacy Features Allows Targeted Features to Thrive

**Pruning Legacy Features Allows Targeted Features to Thrive**

Source: Gartner  
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## Analysis

### Use Product Analytics to Identify Legacy Product Capabilities

The first hurdle that product managers must cross when removing legacy product capabilities is identifying the capabilities that should be removed. This is a deceptively difficult task because there is always pressure from a vocal minority of customers and stakeholders to never deprecate any capability. However, with the knowledge that every capability in a product incurs incremental cost in technical complexity, prerelease testing, in-life troubleshooting and ongoing maintenance, product managers must conduct their due diligence in identifying capabilities for pruning.

**“Every capability in a product incurs incremental cost in technical complexity, prerelease testing, in-life troubleshooting, and ongoing maintenance/support.”**

The clearest source of information regarding what capabilities can be considered for pruning is found in the insights derived from product analytics data. Homegrown or off-the-shelf product analytics data provides the best insights into what capabilities are being used, who is using them and how often they are being used. Even without the advanced analysis provided by many off-the-shelf tooling, product managers can quickly identify less-used capabilities and prioritize them for further research and understanding.

With the more advanced analysis provided by these tools, however, product managers can dive even deeper into their user behavior and better understand whether it is the capability that's not needed or a customer experience issue preventing or frustrating usage. Detailed insights from user path or friction point analysis, or usage playback give additional context to the raw numbers, and enable the product manager using them to build a compelling story to support retiring or refreshing of legacy capabilities.

Product managers looking to identify legacy capabilities to consider for retirement must:

- Collect and analyze basic usage statistics (life cycle trends such as declining feature usage, increased churn or increase in support tickets) to identify potential features for pruning.
- Leverage extended analysis like user pathing, friction point analysis and usage playback to support decisions about what capabilities to retire.
- Understand where low usage might be driven by poor design or implementation (e.g., high rage clicks, high dropoff/bounce, high support tickets and high customer effort) versus capabilities that truly no longer reflect the needs of the product's target users (e.g., low onboarding/adoption rate, low CSAT and high churn).

## Leverage Customer Journey Maps to Uncover Unnecessary Complexity

One other form of quantitative analysis to discover legacy capabilities due for retirement is through the use of a customer journey mapping exercise. This effort keeps the discussion focused narrowly on the overall user and customer experience and can supplement product analytics or replace them in companies that have not yet adopted such solutions. In organizations that have already performed customer journey mapping, this exercise should be viewed as an opportunity to refresh those maps. In organizations that have not adopted journey maps, this is the perfect opportunity to add it to the toolbelt of the product team.

The purpose of this type of mapping exercise is to reframe the overall customer experience with a lens toward identifying nonstandard or peripheral journeys that do not directly contribute to achieving the goals of your primary user persona(s). In this way, the work is a bit more broad than that described in *How to Run an Effective Customer Journey Mapping Workshop*, but the general approach is the same:

1. Identify the persona(s) that will be targeted
2. Identify the goal(s) that the persona wants to achieve
3. Map the process within the product to achieve those goals
4. Review the product's UX and UI to optimize for these journeys

For purposes of step 4, the focus on identifying opportunities to reduce or remove complexity is the key deliverable. Features, functions and capabilities that are not reflected in the primary journeys mapped should be carefully analyzed for continued support. Product managers should eye such capabilities with a skeptical eye — every path that provides an option to detour from a key goal is one that unnecessarily complicates the customer experience.

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*A product that attempts to solve every problem for every possible customer actually solves no valuable problems at all for any specific customer.*

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It's also possible that analysis of some of these capabilities might reveal another persona or set of goals that the product could support (or continue to support). This then feeds into the strategic decisions about who the product serves, what goals it should focus on and where the company's and product's distinctive competencies lie. A product that attempts to solve every problem for every possible customer actually solves no valuable problems at all for any specific customer.

Product managers looking to leverage customer journey maps to further refine their decisions about pruning their product garden must:

- Establish an understanding of the core customer journey or journeys that fully support your target user(s).

- Augment this understanding with other supported journeys and experiences to flesh out the overall journey that users can take within the product.
- Review the complete picture of this holistic view to determine which capabilities or functions should remain; which should be retired; and where or how to adjust the user experience to accommodate the target user(s) needs.

## Soften the Blow of Retiring Features

No matter how it is done, the removal of features, capabilities or use cases will undoubtedly create resistance – both internal among stakeholders and external from users. A feature or capability serving absolutely no current users is rare. There are several ways to minimize this cost and optimize for ongoing review and focusing of features and capabilities that benefit all customers in the long run.

Most importantly, there must be a clear plan around when, how and how often such changes will be made. Some best practices in this area include:

- Aligning your removal of outdated features with the release of new and compelling capabilities
- Leveraging technologies such as feature flags to turn off capabilities for users before actually removing them from the codebase
- Either removing capabilities infrequently and in batches or frequently in small increments; do not randomly remove capabilities without rhyme or reason

Secondly, the communication strategy must be standardized and implemented so that the benefits of changing capabilities are highlighted, motivating users to adapt to their benefit. Some best practices in this area are to:

- Premessage the removal of capabilities likely to impact users known to be vocal in dissent, providing workarounds in advance where they may exist – taking a personal approach to particularly important customers/clients.
- Provide clear time frames and deadlines related to the removal of capabilities and stick as closely to those dates provided as reasonably possible.
- Announce major changes no less than six months in advance of removal and minor changes no less than three months in advance.

- Package any messaging around removal of capabilities along with (and preceded by) announcements of new capabilities; use a “compliment sandwich” approach to optimize for positive reception of the message.
- Minimize the impact when messaging removals, maximizing the value being delivered by other components of the product and/or release.

## Evidence

The analysis and advice provided in this research are built from constant scanning of the market, as well as from the aggregation of analyst experience and ongoing interactions with both end users and technology and service providers. We have used a range of sources to feed our perspective on the topics discussed in this research, including:

- Primary research regarding product management tools and practices
- Gartner client inquiries and conversations with end users and vendors
- Discussions between Gartner analysts with expertise in product management industry and professional best practices

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