

What is the most important qualification for the Product Manager?

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The strategic nature and importance of product management is beginning to be accepted. Before 2009, many companies had an approach to product initiatives much like one would approach the lottery. Today, stakeholders demand an increase in corporate competitive advantage from every product initiative. There are too many examples of the severe penalties resulting from poor product management for it to be ignored any longer.

Because product management is so important, a short blurb on what I've found to be the most important qualifications of a product manager might be relevant. Well, it depends. I bet you knew I'd say that. Here are the three most significant factors you should consider before deciding on qualification alignment.

- Size of the Product Management team
- Where is the product in its lifecycle
- Product Strategy

I know that the organization's culture is important, as is the product's reputation, whether or not there is a project manager on the team, etc. All of these aspects influence the product manager's effectiveness and must be addressed, but these are what I call 'constant' factors. The typical skills of a mature adult worth \$100k will satisfy these needs.

Look at it this way. What if we did a sensitivity analysis on various personality traits. Which attributes would we find have the most impact on the types of behavior we need in a successful product manager? Of the many 'constant' factors, I've listed a few here.

- Social skills
- Flexibility and adaptability
- Analytic skills & problem solving
- Organizational skills
- Able to build trust

What is the most important qualification for the Product Manager?

- Passion
- Creative thinking
- Effective communication, listening skills, persuasive speaking, ability to collaborate
- Understanding of your market
- Intellectual curiosity, question everything
- Empathy
- Dealing with ambiguity
- Leadership
- Big-picture & strategic thinking
- Simplify

I'm going to bundle all these together and call them the 'constant' stuff that, regardless of the three prime concerns I listed earlier, regardless of your career field, all mature humans in the twenty-first century should have if they want to excel in life.

So in addition to all the 'constant' stuff, ask what else needs to be considered.

Size of the Product Management Team: As the team size grows from one person [you], to over 15 and 20 members, what changes do you have to make as a Product Manager? How does the role of product management change? Whereas with small teams, the normal amount of the 'constant' skills was sufficient, now you must master them all.

Your communication, listening, speaking, writing, and collaboration skills must go beyond the normal and include refined facilitation skills, mentoring, and coaching skills. Organizational skills become much more formalized and standardized, driving the need of standards training and certification. More time is spent in teambuilding and negotiation than in the fundamentals of product management. You wonder if you shouldn't have a law degree, maybe 10 years of political activism. Certainly consider the team size before determining qualification alignment.

Surprisingly, not much is in the literature about **where the product is in its lifecycle**. This factor can have a devastating impact on the needed qualifications of a product manager. As a new product, the competitive advantage is always gained through product features. But as the market matures, the competitors all begin to look alike; they all have the same features in one form or another. To maintain or increase competitive advantage, more and more thought is given to process automation and innovation. In this environment, the required qualifications of a Product Manager change dramatically. Competitive process innovation is much different than

feature innovation. Not just experience, but a winning history of competitive process engineering and automation is required. Certainly consider the product's position in its lifecycle before determining qualification alignment.

Is the product considered to be a dog, rising star, cash cow, or question by stakeholders. Don't try to change the **product strategy**, which is based on the stakeholder's perception of your product, without a charter to do so. If chartered, then the skills needed to transition from a cash cow into a new rising star are much different than those needed to nurture the cash cow. Transitioning product strategy, expectations, and perception (internally and externally) requires a different skill set than the 'constant' set mentioned above. Now, the product manager needs to be able to identify and break the constraints locking the product in its position. With each constraint overcome, a new one is identified. Analytic skills, performance analysis, constraint theory play a much more sophisticated role than in other environments. Certainly consider the product strategy before determining qualification alignment.

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