Product Management Needs Survey – Responses and Analysis

I recently conducted an informal survey amongst Canadian technology product managers. I discovered some interesting things with respect to what product management professionals think and what they think their company's perception is of them (how product management is valued by the company). I also got interesting responses regarding what product managers feel the attributes of a "great" product manager are.

What do you consider to be the biggest obstacle to product managers improving their value to the enterprise?

This first question was intentionally written as "open-ended". The result is a high degree of variance in the responses (to be expected). I've categorized the responses (some groupings were a "stretch", but I find the overall trend interesting).   In addition I've excerpted some of the comments below (I feel that they articulate the "top of mind" that product management professionals are feeling with respect to perceived value within their respective organizations):

Category	Ranking (%)
Perceived product management value at all levels in the company	42
Organizational environment - roles and responsibilities	33
Not developing to customer need	20
Purely economics	5

Perceived value - generally, it seems that clear value to the corporate executive and co-workers is a sore point with many product managers. Lack of understanding within the company of the value which product management provides is common. Some of the specific issues raised include:

- company emphasis on short term initiatives in place of long range strategic
- no mechanisms or metrics to connect product management efforts to revenue (profitability and success)
- company seems willing to spend money on professional development for engineering but not for product management or marketing
- poor communication (in both directions) between development and customers

A few responses in particular (I've paraphrased a bit) stated the communication problem well:

" the communication factor between Product Managers and key stakeholders.   Benefits and value propositions are not always fully understood by stakeholders and other key non-technical personnel. There is incredible value having someone who is almost overly sensitive to the technical dialog that the stakeholders can bear."

I also liked:

"Last minute sales-driven feature requests to close a sale may be harmful to the long term health of the company. When a company is "sales driven", it can easily lose sight of the long term product roadmap, which undermines research done by the product manager (who understands the customer problem). A good PM will revise the roadmap based on feedback from sales, but not necessarily implement it for each sales opportunity."

Organizational environment – these responses ranged from "everybody stepping on each other's toes" inefficiency to "explain the difference between a product and a project". Some superficial symptoms are easy to fix in an organization but there are often root causes behind them that require more time and money to resolve sustainably.

Developing to customer need – 20% of the responses had some flavour of "if we build it they will come"; the old technology-driven mentality that has sunk so many tech companies (yet investors keep getting sucked into giving these guys money).

What attribute or characteristic would you say makes a "great" product manager?

Again I've tried to broadly categorize the responses, but the bottom line is that being passionate about understanding the problem that needs to be solved, communicating that to other people and having some market and technical savvy sums up the "perfect" product manager.

Category	Ranking (%)
Communication skills	18
Focus on understanding the problem	18
Strategic vision	16
Technical and marketing knowledge	16
Passion for collaboration	12
Positive attitude	7
Cognitive analysis	5
Market knowledge	5
Business skills	3

Communication skills – being able to articulate a clear message to both non-technical (customers, management, accounting, analysts) and technical (engineering, development, support and QA) is one of the most important attributes of a product management professional.
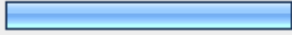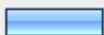
Focus on understanding the problem – you could call it customer empathy, or just call it having a clear vision of what problem is being solved and why people are willing to pay your company to solve it. Either way this is an equally important attribute.

Strategic vision – connecting the dots of complex puzzles and seeing beyond this quarters' financial performance.
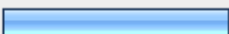
Technical and marketing knowledge – since a lot of product managers come from the "development" side of the house, this is often the most frequent attribute found in product management professionals, however it can also develop into a tendency to jump in and start solving the problem (coming up with solutions for the problem is the job of engineering and development, not product management).

Passion for collaboration – enthusiasm for developing others and leveraging an organization into a problem solving juggernaut – in my humble opinion this skill separates the good product managers from the great ones.

What is the biggest barrier to you participating in product management seminars and/or training?

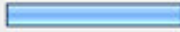|		Response Percent
availability of funds		52.2%
no time		41.3%
no need for improvement		2.2%
no appropriate seminars/training available		6.5%
view Other (please specify)		17.4%

How important is an investment in "product management excellence" for the success of your company?

		Response Percent
extremely important		45.7%
important		41.3%
neutral		8.7%
not so important		2.2%
totally unimportant		2.2%

Overall, how many years of product management and business experience do you have?

	Response Percent
less than 2 years	2.3%
2 to 5 years	23.3%
5 to 10 years	25.6%
more than 10 years	48.8%

With which kinds of product/customers/markets are you most familiar?

	Response Percent
business-to-business	74.4%
mass market consumer	16.3%
software-as-a-service	37.2%
enterprise software	41.9%
professional services	27.9%
Other (please specify)	4.7%

Where has you're your primary focus been?

	Response Percent
planning	65.1%
developing	55.8%
marketing	41.9%
supporting	27.9%
funding	2.3%
evangelizing	20.9%
Other (please specify)	2.3%