THE PRODUCT TRIO IN SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT

A collaborative model for product leadership that has been successfully adopted by the most well known technology companies including Google, Amazon, and Atlassian.

WHAT'S A PRODUCT TRIO?

A product trio[1] is composed of a product manager[2], a user experience (UX) designer[3], and a software engineer[4] all aligned to user and mission needs. Each member brings their expertise to the table, enabling a more holistic understanding of the product from different perspectives. This continuous collaboration delivers a deeper, more nuanced approach to problem-solving, idea generation, and decision-making, while de-risking successful product delivery

WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

A product trio is jointly responsible for a shared outcome. They interview customers together. They generate potential solutions together. They iteratively test and develop those solutions together to avoid silos that can lead to gaps in knowledge and coordination between team members, creating shared accountability with some overlap among the roles, a crucial aspect.

For example, product managers should have a good understanding of design principles, and designers should have a good understanding of technology. And most critically, all members of the trio focus on user and mission needs. This way, everyone on the team has a better understanding of the work being done by other team members, and can make better decisions about how to move forward. The product trio works together to ensure that the product vision is aligned with user needs, technical feasibility, organizational constraints (budget, time, policies, etc.), and that all decisions are based on a shared understanding of what is possible and what is not.

Another key is focusing on the full end-to-end product development process. This means that the team should optimize for the entire product development process - from early discovery through delivery, rather than individual performance metrics. By focusing on the

end-to-end process, the team can better understand the trade-offs that need to be made, and make better decisions about how to move forward.

BENEFITS OF THE PRODUCT TRIO

Enhanced Communication: The product trio ensures all team members, regardless of their role, receive coherent and consistent information. This alignment reduces miscommunication and misunderstandings, streamlines the development process, and produces more informed and well-rounded decisions.

User-Centric Development: Through the trio's combined focus on users' needs, the product is more likely to succeed with its intended audience. This approach leads to products that are not only functional but also highly user-friendly and engaging.

Balanced Product Value and Time-to-Solution: One of the crucial challenges in product development is balancing the value offered to the user with the time-to-solution. The product trio model helps in striking this balance, ensuring that products deliver maximum value without unnecessary delays.

Risk Management: Every member of the product trio is both responsible and accountable for assessing each type of risk.

Viable

Desirable   Feasible

Usable
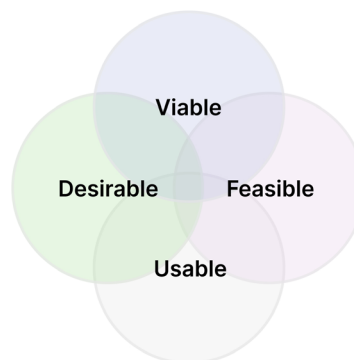
Does anyone want it?

Can we build it?

Should we build it?

Is it easy to use?

OUTCOMES VS. OUTPUTS

The most successful - and empowered - product trios receive and then deliver on desired mission or enterprise *outcomes* from their stakeholders and leadership, rather than directives to "build feature x, then feature y", *i.e.*, outputs. This represents the highest performance level of product teams, and requires time and experience - but is the most valuable for the organization. In this so-called Product Operating Model[5], senior leadership defines priority mission/enterprise outcomes, and product teams led by product trios deliver on them by defining and sequencing the features through their dynamic decision-making process.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Despite its numerous benefits, implementing the product trio model is not without its challenges. These include ensuring balanced participation from all members, managing complex decision-making processes, and maintaining team alignment on goals and timelines. To overcome these challenges, teams must create an environment of open communication and mutual respect, where each member's expertise is valued and considered. Regular and transparent communication with stakeholders, including end-users, senior leaders and other team members, is vital to keep everyone aligned and informed.

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[1] To learn more about Product Trios, see "Continuous Discovery Habits" by Teresa Torres

[2] Product manager: "...identifies the customer need and the larger business/mission objectives that a product or feature will fulfill, articulates what success looks like for a product, and rallies a team to turn that vision into a reality."
[Atlassian blog, https://www.atlassian.com/agile/product-management]

[3] UX/UI Designer: "...responsible for the workflow, look and feel of a product, website, or app. They work with teams of product managers, writers, and developers to create high-fidelity screens and prototypes that represent how the product will look and function once it's released."
[Designlab blog, https://designlab.com/blog/what-does-a-ux-designer-do#:~:text=User%20Experience%20(UX)%20Designers%20are,it's%20released%20to%20the%20public]

[4] Software Engineer (including Cloud, Data, and Cybersecurity specialists with similar roles): "...creates web applications, mobile apps, robots, operating systems, and network systems. They design and develop software solutions that meet their [organizations'] needs and expectations..."
[computerscience.org, https://www.computerscience.org/careers/software-engineer]

[5] To learn more about empowered product teams, see "Empowered: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Products", and "Transformed: Moving to the Product Operating Model", both by Marty Cagan