

News DIRECT



Share



Print-Friendly Newsletter



Search Back issues

IN THIS ISSUE

[Chairperson's Corner](#)

by Andy Ferris

[Letter From The Editor](#)

by Juliet Sandrowicz

[Life Insurance Sales Opportunities In The High-Net-Worth Market](#)

by Walter H. Zultowski, Ph.D.

[Where are the Great Product Managers?](#)

by Susan Loconto Penta

[From Pain to Gain: Learning to Leverage Conflict](#)

Dr. Liz Berney

[Automated Life Underwriting: Phase 2](#)

Maria Thomson

[2010 Annual Meeting MaD Session Highlights](#)

By Marketing and Distribution
Section



WHERE ARE THE GREAT PRODUCT MANAGERS?

By Susan Loconto Penta

Although the job market is rife with applicants, finding the right combination of skills and experience that will result in a first-class product management team is never easy. Where is the best place to look for great product managers and what type of background is ideal? Are there key signs that you can look for during the interview process that will help identify candidates who will succeed in the role?

Match the Team with the Mission

Finding the right people goes to the heart of what defines a successful product management organization. We often use a military analogy when we are thinking about product management against a corporate backdrop; great product managers are akin to being members of a "special operations group" in the armed forces where each individual is highly skilled and has a critical role which, if not performed, can put the entire mission in jeopardy. Your success as the head of a product organization has everything to do with identifying and recruiting the people for these "special forces," honing their capabilities and configuring teams with the right complement of skills to match the "mission."

Look for Key Attributes

We have identified five key characteristics for candidates that are more important than years of experience, job titles or educational degrees. As you consider applicants, put aside the resume for a moment and look for this hierarchy of attributes:

- Energy—the best product managers lead by example, have no staff and hold themselves accountable for every aspect of product success. Instrumentality is the DNA of the successful product manager and persuading the organization to support the right outcome takes boundless energy.

LINKS



[NewsDirect](#)



[Marketing & Distribution Section](#)



[Related Links](#)



[Contact Us](#)

CONTACT

SECTION COUNCIL INFORMATION

- **Enthusiasm**—if you can get someone else excited about your product anywhere in the world, you will get mindshare for the mission. A born product manager looks at every situation encountered in everyday life from a product point of view. He/she should easily be able to tell you about their list of favorite products and what puts them in that category.
- **Intelligence**—defined as being aware of what you need to know, having the intellectual capital to think on his/her feet, understanding how to get things done. Balancing the here and now with a long-term view takes practical intelligence. Without innate brain power, a product manager will struggle to tackle the unexpected daily problems while at the same time, being able to chart and execute a course that aligns their product with the larger corporate objectives.
- **Organization**—it's all about fit with your culture, or at least your vision of where the culture is headed. In the interview ask how the candidate addressed challenges within a team and across functional boundaries.
- **Understanding**—background in the technology, competitors and customers will get you off to a quick start. But specific domain expertise is not always critical to success. If candidates have enough energy to be the last "man" standing, enough enthusiasm to get a rock excited about their product, enough intelligence to know what they don't know, and enough cultural savvy and grace to gain the support of the most skeptical executives, they should be able to master the subject matter.

Motivate the Team

One of the problems with conventional, hierarchical organization models is that they motivate people to increase their span of control and to think of themselves as reporting to a supervisor or department. Successful product managers see themselves as accountable to their product. This view of the world has significant implications for reward systems and, in many businesses, promotion policies are not aligned with motivating successful product people. Incentives and recognition must be tied to measurable product success, not to span of control or budgetary responsibility.

Product managers are a very self-motivated species. If you find that motivating the team is a chronic problem then consider that you may not have the right players.

One note about career paths. Don't expect to hold on to the product superstars for more than a handful of years because they won't be challenged by doing the same thing year after year. Moving up the corporate ladder in the conventional sense is not their driving goal. Unless you can create an opportunity or new challenge such as spinning out a new business or giving them responsibility for a

division or an acquisition, these entrepreneurs will eventually move on to bigger and better challenges.

Advice for the Coach

The best way to take the motivation out of a product manager is for you to jump in, make the decisions and do the job. We find the best management style for the product group leader is that of a coach—call the play, when the play isn't working, rework the play and hold the individuals accountable for getting the job done. Come to think of it, maybe that's why the best coaches are rarely former Heisman trophy winners.

Finding great product managers is never easy, but the good news is that when you find the right attributes in a candidate, you can grow the talent by supporting a culture that reinforces the right behaviors.

Susan Loconto Penta is Co-Founder and Partner at MIDIOR Consulting in Massachusetts. Susan can be reached at slpenta@midior.com