Accountabilities of a Professional Product Owner

Guidance to help you tackle the complexities of Product Ownership

Helping you deliver the best value

So you've just been named Scrum Product Owner for a big initiative. You know it's an important role and want to be sure the outcome is successful. This paper provides an overview of your accountabilities as a Professional Product Owner to help you tackle the complexities of Product Ownership.

In the Scrum Framework, as defined by the "Scrum Guide," the Product Owner is accountable for maximizing the value of the product resulting from the work of the Scrum Team and effective Product Backlog management, which includes:
- Developing and explicitly communicating the Product Goal
- Creating and clearly communicating Product Backlog items
- Ordering Product Backlog items
- Ensuring that the Product Backlog is transparent, visible and understood

These key accountabilities are essential to achieve the best outcomes. It's crucial that the Product Owner is someone who knows and is empowered to influence the organizational culture, objectives and goals.

In this paper, we explore the key complexities of Product Ownership and ways to address them. We hope these insights will be beneficial as you use Professional Scrum™ and Professional Product Ownership to solve complex problems to help your clients (internal to your organization or companies you engage with in a vendor-client relationship) deliver the best value to the end users of the product.

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Professionalism is key for the Scrum Product Owner

Scrum is cited by analysts and the press as being the most widely used agile framework, with potentially millions of people applying it every day. To prove the impact of Scrum, just wear a t-shirt with Scrum written on it and walk through an airport. People will stop you and ask you questions about Scrum and whether you can help them do x or y.

As the Product Owner, you're responsible for maximizing the value of the product. As such, you play a key role in ensuring your team is achieving better results through Scrum. It starts with an understanding of the foundations of Scrum: an empirical process; empowered, self-managed teams; and a focus on continuous improvement. Surrounding the framework and its ideas are four additional elements that you need to focus on.

- **Discipline** – To be effective with Scrum requires discipline. You have to deliver to gain learning; you have to do the mechanics of Scrum; you have to challenge your preconceived ideas about your skills, role and understanding of the problem; and you have to work in a transparent and structured way.

- **Behaviors** – The Scrum values were introduced to the "Scrum Guide" in 2016 in response to the need for a supporting culture for Scrum to be successful. The Scrum Values describe five simple ideas that, when practiced, encourage an agile culture: Courage, focus, commitment, respect and openness are behaviors that both Scrum Teams and the organizations they work within should exhibit.

- **Value** – Scrum Teams work on problems that, when solved, deliver value to customers and stakeholders. Teams work for a customer who rewards them for that work. But the relationship is complicated because the problems are complex. The customer might not know what they want, or the economics of the solution might be unclear, or the quality and safety of the solution may be unknown.

- **Active community membership** – Scrum is a team sport where the team is small. To be effective, Professional Scrum Teams must work with other members of their community to learn new skills and share experiences.

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Effective Product Ownership is complex

To be effective as the Scrum Product Owner, you'll participate in activities that are complex, daunting and highly critical in delivering value to both the users of the product and the producing organization.

As a Product Owner, you must be able to collaborate with many people. That requires balancing listening, interpreting and decision-making. Users often don't know what they want until you show it to them or tell them. However, at the same time, if you show them something you may end up influencing their decision. It's a fine line. So it's important to listen to what users are saying, understand how they're working today and how they would like to work, and then feed that back to them in a way that can help drive conversation and eventually some form of consensus.

Stakeholder representation: Balancing multiple requirements

Stakeholder representation is a key part of your role as the Product Owner. However, representing all stakeholders at the same time can be difficult. On the one hand, you need to provide value to the organization by building the product, while, on the other hand, you must satisfy the users through value delivered to them.

Users may not always consider the impact of their needs. For example, a product that may satisfy a user's every need could cost, say, $2 to build, but the users may only be willing to pay $1 for that capability. The product could be valuable for the users, but it might provide negative value for other stakeholders within the organization. You need to balance this set of requirements and understand if there is something else that can be achieved to provide value to both. Is there another way, other options, etc.

Scrum Team representation: Describe the problem, don't solve it

As the Product Owner, you must also collaborate with the rest of the Scrum Team members who are working together to provide the capabilities needed to deliver value. It's important not to solve the problem for the team, but instead describe the problem that needs to be solved. It's left to the Developers on the Scrum Team to determine how best to solve the problem. Group thinking and taking a broader view can be important to solving problems and influencing those who are developing the solution to feel part of that solution.

At the same time, the Product Owner is part of that Scrum Team and the solution. So it's critical that you achieve a balance between representing stakeholders and the Scrum Team.

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Product Ownership is a team effort

Product Ownership is often a partnership between your organization and an outside consulting firm. However, an outside firm can never know your organizational culture, or the objectives and goals of your customers as well as you do. Which is why your organization should take on the the accountabilities of Product Ownership, supported by teams from a consulting firm.

The Product Owner within your organization will have ultimate authority (even when new technology is involved), but some of the responsibilities can be delegated to the Scrum Team from a consulting firm for you to partner with. This may include specific knowledge, expertise and skills like architecture, analysis, business knowledge and subject matter expertise.

Supplementing these activities adds value to your organization by having deep industry expertise from a consulting firm supporting you throughout the engagement. It also provides the consulting firm with a focused mindset to articulate technology decisions on Product Backlog items, insights on product architecture, and supports the process of enhancing the Product Backlog to make it ready for the Scrum Team. This partnership also enables Product Owners to retain focus on key activities within the organization, such as driving the customer focus and ensuring there is continued business engagement and alignment to the product vision.

## Why your organization needs to take on Product Ownership

If Product Ownership falls to a consulting firm, more stakeholder input and collaboration would be needed, causing unnecessary delay and disconnect in decision-making and communication. Pitfalls include:

- Inaccurate visioning and misinterpretation
- Lack of understanding of your company culture
- Lack of awareness of your company objectives
- Lack of strong stakeholder relationship
- Lack of representation from your organization in third-party collaboration

The Product Owner partnership

Product Ownership from your organization	Both	Consulting firm
• Business strategy	• Product strategy	• Requirement strategy
• Customer focus	• Business case	• Project focus
• Competitive analysis	• Writing Product Backlog items	• Non-functional requirements
• Business engagement	• User Story cost/benefit analysis	• Help splitting Product Backlog items
• Funding endorsement	• Backlog refinement	• Alignment to business architecture
• Issue escalations	• Acceptance testing	• Process modeling

This means that from the perspective of the five levels of Product Owner(ship) (see graph below) taught in Scrum.org Professional Scrum Product Owner training, a Product Owner who is not from the producing organization can only be as effective as a scribe or a proxy at best. (Each of the Product Owner stages is an upgrade of its predecessor. For a detailed explanation, please visit Evolution of the Product Owner, Scrum.org.)

Evolution of the Product Owner
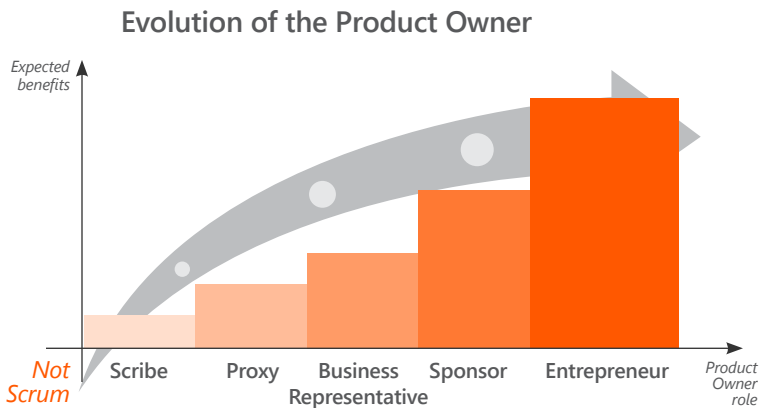
Only when Scrum is used professionally (i.e., Professional Scrum) will you start to see benefits. When Professional Scrum is used and the Product Owner is a scribe, you will realize some benefits. When the Product Owner is a proxy, the benefits increase and so on.

Product Owner collaboration is key to understanding the problem

Although Product Ownership should fall to your organization, the teams from consulting firms must collaborate with the Product Owner to understand the problem that needs to be solved. As a Product Owner, you're expected to participate in group thinking, and teams supporting the Product Owner must also collaborate at the same level.

Product Owner representation: It's not the same as Product Ownership

As a Professional Product Owner you need to balance your representation to the stakeholders, including end users and the Scrum Team. However, there are times when you won't be able to spend as much time as required with Scrum Team members. That's why the "Scrum Guide" notes that the Product Owner may do the work or in some areas delegate responsibilities to others. Regardless, the Product Owner remains accountable.

It's important to have the right skills on the Scrum Team so they can be self-sufficient and support the Product Owner. These skills may include business architecture and business analysis. Being able to articulate the problems to be solved is important for the Scrum Team as it enables transparency and reduces rework caused by misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the problem itself. But beware that Product Owner representation is not the same as Product Ownership and is certainly not a proxy for the Product Owner.

Those with business analyst skills must enable self-management in the Scrum Team by helping teammates view the problem through the lens of the Product Owner and vice versa. This will help you, as the Product Owner, see the technical challenges of building a product that meets all needs. As Product Owner, you need to help communicate the desire to produce a $2 solution with a $1 budget and brainstorm ways to deliver value to all stakeholders.

Agile delivery leadership is an important success factor

For any client-vendor partnership to be successful, leadership support is essential. Strong delivery leadership from the consulting firm puts the structure and controls in place to meet objectives and support growth of the relationship through meaningful interaction and collaboration. Leadership support also creates an environment for Scrum Teams to become successful in delivering value by defogging the fine lines and reducing the complexity though governance.

In addition, leadership is important to enable one of the values of the manifesto for agile software development: customer collaboration over contract negotiation. This requires that the parties are committed to achieving desired outcomes rather than scope of work.

For example, no one knows precisely which product features will deliver user value. Hence, agreeing to scope is meaningless because it doesn't guarantee the desired outcomes. Rather, agree that you'll collaborate to define minimum viable product (MVP) functionality; you'll create a roadmap in the form of a Product Goal and short-term Sprint Goals; and you'll commit to achieving those goals or changing the Product Goal to respond to any conditions that might come up. The focus should always be on continually delivering the best possible value, learning from that to keep moving forward and improving what you deliver, and optimizing your ways of working that enable you to do so.

Delivery leadership empowers team members to collaborate with you as the Product Owner, provides guidance to you and ultimately serves as guard rails for the entire Scrum Team.

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Takeaways to help you deliver the best value

In this paper we've explored key accountabilities of Product Ownership. Below are a few key takeaways and considerations as you use Professional Scrum and Professional Product Ownership to deliver the best value:

- Don't undermine the accountability of Product Ownership as it's crucial for the Scrum Teams and the organization they serve.
- If you're a leader in the organization, empower Product Owners in their stakeholder and Scrum Team representations.
- When selecting a consulting partner, in addition to their technical expertise, it's important they have the right agile mindset and understand Professional Product Ownership and how to collaborate with Product Owners.
- If you're a Product Owner, be transparent with your leaders, stakeholders and end users. Know that the consulting partner you may be working with should be there to complement you and not replace you or be your proxy.
- Most importantly, stay focused on continually delivering the best possible value and optimizing your ways of working to enable that.

If you have any thoughts or would like to share your experience, we'd like to hear from you. Please contact us. For more information, please visit: https://www.avanade.com/en/technologies/ agile or scrum.org.

Scrum on!

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