

## 21 Methods to Engage and Retain Your Product Owner in an Agile Project

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### **Abstract**

One difficulty Scrum Masters have is Product Owners who are only involved rather than committed, or worse. Product Owners are necessary for Scrum Teams to succeed. It is paramount to keep them as actively contributing members of any Scrum Team. This article will describe 21 specific methods to use when engaging a Product Owner, as well as how to re-engage Product Owners who cease to be active members of Scrum Teams.

### **Article**

For years I was frustrated by the way we manage projects in the IT industry. As we became more evolved through ever improving evolutions of waterfall methodologies, we became more and more distant from our clients to the point where it was rare to actually talk to a client after the initial business requirements were completed.

When I had the opportunity to start using and then teaching the Agile process at AT&T, I felt like I was like coming out of the woods and into the dawn. The Agile process calls out that the Scrum Team is responsible for staying in constant communication with Product Owners, or clients. Product Owner input is necessary because he tells the team exactly how to add business value through creating, prioritizing and managing User Stories, as well as guiding the team in the correct direction.

Soon after I began to work with Agile as a project manager, I quickly came to realize that many Agile teams across the industry, including one of my own Scrum Teams, were finding it difficult to keep their Product Owners engaged. The risk of having an apathetic Product Owner is that the Scrum Team may lose direction, and may eventually fail leaving the expected business value, which the team was originally chartered to obtain, wasted. I gave this considerable thought while looking at past projects to determine how I had dealt with project team members (who were not available when I needed them) I also interviewed top Agile coaches and highly successful Scrum Masters for advice. What I will show you here are 21 approaches that Scrum Masters can use to keep Product Owners as active members of the Scrum Team.

The following suggestions fit into one or more of these three categories: 1) How to correctly engage a Product Owner, 2) How to keep them active in the project 3) What can be done if you have significant issues engaging your product owner.

1. **Social Contract:** Scrum Masters should produce and provide a written role description, including expectations, to the Product Owner and the Product Owner's manager at the onset. This should also include a list of meetings (aka ceremonies) that are to be attended and the intended frequency of attendance. This is very similar to the communication plan used in traditional/waterfall type project management. In addition, if the product owner is unfamiliar with Agile methodology an overview is essential and will help in setting time commitment expectations. .
2. **Partnership:** Ensure the entire team is engaged in creating User Stories. Don't leave the Product Owner to fend for themselves on this. The input of the entire Scrum Team is essential to ensuring that the most representative User Stories are captured. The Product owner will then be assured that the team that is actually working on the User Stories understands the intent through participating in this up-front experience.
3. **Monitor Behavior:** Pay attention to the warning signs when the Product Owner is ceding his responsibility to the Scrum Team. You may be able to find someone else from the client organization to fill in. It's best to express your discontent as early as possible with the management of the Product Owner and get the issue resolved rather than live with it for so long that it starts to affect the team's deliverables. It is my experience that if you proceed with an absent Product Owner for too long it will be seen as acceptable behavior. This will be detrimental to the viability of the Scrum Team. There is an Agile maxim that reads: Fail early and learn from it. In this case, if your Product Owner attendance is becoming spotty, identify it early and react to it as quickly as possible.
4. **Set Expectations:** Ensure up front that the Product Owner knows that even though the nature of the Agile methodology makes it easier to inject scope changes there is still a budget to adhere to. At some point if the Product Owner is not committing to a limited scope of change then lower priority items will go undone due to lack of time or financial resources. This is important as people tend to over revise their requirements and lose sight of the budget constraints when the schedule seems to be elastic. Reiterating this at the start of a project will keep the Product Owner from becoming frustrated with the process and subsequently disengaging.
5. **Time Commitments:** When I've looked at the calendars of possible candidates as Product Owner, I've often noticed that every minute has been marked out for the next 2.5 weeks! Be sure that the Product Owner has the bandwidth to work with your team. If not discuss your expectations of the proper time commitment for success. Or, try to get someone else assigned as the Product Owner. You may be able to ask for a Product Owner Delegate to represent the Product Owner or assist him.

6. Success Stories: Proof of early successes builds confidence not only in Scrum Teams but also in the Agile process itself. Product Owners confident in the process are more likely to stay invested.
7. Use Successful Examples: Find a Scrum Team where the Product Owner is an active and successful member of the Scrum Team. Arrange for your new Product Owner to observe the successful behaviors of an example Product Owner. Having a positive role model and outcomes will help to shape future behavior. Allow them to observe key Agile ceremonies such as vision meetings, daily stand-ups, etc. These will help the Product Owner better understand their role as well as how key Agile ceremonies actually operate. This will go a long way to integrating themselves into the process.
8. Conflicting Alliances: Though this is generally a rare occurrence, be vigilant as to whether the Product Owner has conflicting loyalties. Once I was involved in a project where, by the nature of our project, we were going to significantly reduce the legitimate political influence of the Product Owner. I had to constantly monitor and take into careful consideration the behaviors and anticipated behaviors of the Product Owner so that the project was not side tracked.
9. Leadership Support: Have a kickoff meeting where the Project Sponsor initiates the meeting. Clearly demonstrating the support of your Project Sponsor sends a strong signal to the Product Owner that the Scrum Team's mission is to add value to the organization's bottom line. This works to your advantage when you are unsure your Product Owner is committed to your Scrum Team's mission and purpose.
10. Reporting: Providing minutes outlining who was at each ceremony, especially if the Product Owner was present or not, can be one more way to encourage your Product Owner to show up. Showing up is the first step in achieving participation at Agile ceremonies.
11. Metrics: Identify methods to measure the progress of your Product Owner. Two examples are the number of epic user stories created and the number of daily stand up meetings attended. The reason this is important is that a lack of supporting the Scrum Team can quickly be picked up by watching numerical trends and dealt with before the team or project starts to suffer. The Scrum Master can present the metric directly to the Product Owner to find out what is going on.
12. Respect: Be especially respectful of your Product Owner's time. Release them from meetings when appropriate. Start and end meetings on time. The bottom line is that a top notch Product Owner has many opportunities and activities vying for their attention. You'll want to make it as easy and painless as possible for them to support your Scrum Team.

13. Team Demeanor: During a demo listen to Product Owner and don't try to sell them. That is, if they don't like something don't try to seduce them into liking something they don't want. As an example, when my wife and I were out buying her a car we really liked the Fiesta® Unfortunately, they had to drive one in from another state. We were happy to wait. However, the dealer then tried to convince us we really wanted a Focus®. I still have a bad memory from this attempt to slide us into a car that we really just did not want. This can send the message that you may not appreciate the input of the Product Owner and can deaden their desire to fully participate in the Scrum Team's efforts.
14. Challenge Your Product Owner: Set the expectation that, whenever possible, the Product Owner will run Demo meetings. Knowing that they will need to run certain Demos tends to keep the Product Owner's head in the game.
15. Manage Product Owners: If your Product Owner has to leave in the middle of a meeting be sure to contact them to find out why. Remind them they are needed. Some people need to feel wanted and this will help to keep them engaged.
16. Reward: Reward unusually supportive behaviors with a thank you letter CCed to their boss. This goes a long way toward rewarding positive behavior.
17. Respect: Pay attention to the priorities that the Product Owner sets and value their opinions. A Product Owner will tend to be more engaged when their contributions are noticed and appreciated. When planning meetings respect time zones and lunch periods of the Product Owner. This will make it easier for them to attend critical activities.
18. Coaching: Regularly coach the Scrum Team members on their roles especially Product Owner. It is so easy for any team member to blend into the background of a well oiled team and easy to feel one's individual contributions are not as important. I've found this to be true for Product Owners. There are two important points: first you are reminding the Product Owner what their charge is but also, you let the team know what they should expect from the Product Owner.
19. Prioritization: This one is fun to do.(Bt not so fun when it happens to me!). Check the priorities of the projects that your time strapped Product Owner is working on (assuming your organization is at the level of maturity of setting an actual priority ranking to each effort). If your project has a higher priority use the priority to make a case that your team should get the Product Owner's time, not someone else's team. Honestly, if your project has a better ranking than another project that means the company has made a choice that your project should get preferential access to organizational resources.
20. Confirm Commitment: Hold a meeting with the Product Owner, Project Sponsor, Scrum Master, and Project Manager, if one exists for the effort. Ascertain whether

the project has enough value that it should be capturing the attention of the Product Owner. If not, consider scrapping the project and allocating resources to a project that adds more business value. Secondly, I strongly recommend that if it is decided to scrap the effort, examine the steps the PMO used to select the project that was being worked on to ascertain what went wrong with the project selection process so the same mistake does not happen again. The reality is resources are scarce and highly talented people like Product Owners are also scarce. Do everything in your power to ensure business assets are being put to the best use.

21. **Throttle Down:** If a Product Owner is not keeping up with the capacity of the team reduce the scope in impacted sprints for that Product Owner and/or add scope from other product owners for other project assuming it is the same Scrum Team doing the work. This accomplishes two things; first the team stays productive and tells the Product Owner that if they don't take advantage of the Scrum Team's capacity, some other project will.

In most situations, Product Owners will make themselves available to support the Scrum Team's needs. However Product Owners can distance themselves from the Scrum Team as other projects or problems seemingly gain priority. The reality is Product Owners are key members of Scrum Teams. They are necessary to Scrum Team success and must be fully engaged or the Scrum Team will fail. To minimize the risk of failure, the Scrum Master be proactive at the start of the project by taking corrective and sometimes even drastic action while the project is running. Agile has proven to be a valuable methodology in industry. It is my hope that the advice shared here will be an asset to all Scrum Masters that have to deal with Product Owner availability issues.

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