

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest

The ideal Product Owner¹

Henny Portman

Introduction

The product backlog gives you a first indication of the product owner maturity of the organization. And especially the length of the product backlog is significant. Saying 'no' to wishes is one of the most important competencies of the ideal product owner. If a product owner always says 'yes' to wishes, the backlog will be more of a waste bin. If everything ends up on the backlog, it will be far too long. That makes a backlog difficult, if not impossible to prioritize. And a lack of priorities is at the expense of the Agile team's strength and added business value. Such a product owner might better be called a 'backlog secretary', 'clerk' or 'shopping list manager'. Product Owners are the voice of the customer that needs to be an entrepreneur of their product.

Scrum guide

As described in the Scrum Guide², the Product Owner is accountable for maximizing the value of the product resulting from the work of the Scrum Team. How this is done may vary widely across organizations, Scrum Teams, and individuals.

The Product Owner is also accountable for effective Product Backlog management, which includes:

- Developing and explicitly communicating the Product Goal.
- Creating and clearly communicating Product Backlog items.
- Ordering Product Backlog items; and,
- Ensuring that the Product Backlog is transparent, visible, and understood.

Is the Product Owner part of business or part of IT?

It's easy to say that this doesn't matter if they fulfil their role. But in my experience, the Product Owner is someone from business rather than IT. You must give business people the control over the product's vision, features and prioritization to maximize business outcomes. They can make business decisions. IT can make the technical decisions. I have seen catastrophic project failures where IT took the role of the Product Owner. The business was very unhappy with the results, it was lacking their feedback, or they didn't even have the change to give feedback.

¹ How to cite this article: Portman, H. (2022). The ideal Product Owner, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue IV, April

² <https://scrumguides.org/scrum-guide.html>

Fix it with a training course?

However, it's not the case that you can send a potential business product owner to a product owner training course, and everything will be fine. In addition to product owner competencies, about which more later, there are also necessary organizational competencies.

Receiving a mandate

The organization, read the management, must give the product owner sufficient mandate to be able to make decisions independently. Without this mandate, a product owner cannot say 'no'. Management must support the product owner and his product vision. If a product owner says 'no', it is 'no'. When management overrules this decision, the product owner is out of the game. The organization will also have to give the product owner sufficient space to carry out the role of product owner. You are not a product owner for a few hours a week; it is important that you are always available to the team and to stakeholders so that no delays occur. Decision latency is one of the key reasons for project failure. You could also classify these competencies under the agile mindset of an organization.

What competences does a Product Owner need?

Some important competences of the ideal product owner are:

Competence	Explanation
Can say "no"	The product owner knows when to say 'no' and how to say 'no'. the Product Owner knows whether the new idea formed will be constructive as a product feature. Always saying yes will result in an unmanageable backlog.
Knowledge of the business	The product owner knows how the organization works. And the product owner understands where the organization stands in the sector and what new developments are taking place in the sector.
Product vision	The product owner needs to be able to develop a clear and inspiring product vision together with stakeholders and communicate this.
Prioritizing	The product owner has knowledge of techniques to prioritize the backlog items. For example, applying Weighted Shortest Job First (WSJF) or using MoSCoW. This stands for the priorities 'Must haves', 'Should haves', 'Could haves' and 'Won't haves (this time)'. ³
Speaking the language	As a product owner, you can communicate with stakeholders or customers and convey this to the developers in understandable language.
Planning	The product owner does not impose goals but accepts the planning that the developers design. Based on the planning, the product owner translates the planning into a SMART sprint goal ³ .

³ SMART sprint goals stands for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound

Experimentation	At the right moment, the product owner can use an experiment or a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) to justify the choices he has made.
Quality	The product owner ensures that the backlog items are clear and complete. If items are unclear or too large, the product owner refines these items together with the other team members. The product owner makes no concessions to the quality of the product to be delivered. The product owner only accepts items that meet all the requirements as laid down in the definition of done. A definition of done is a checklist of acceptance criteria such as successful testing and quality standards. Product demos involve all stakeholders in the results of the product development.
Being open to non-functional backlog items	The product owner understands the concept of 'technical debt'. By removing technical imperfections and quick wins from the developed systems from time to time, future functional changes can be realized more quickly.
Evaluating product progress	The product owner is responsible for the final product. they play a primary role in inspecting and evaluating the progress of the product in each iteration.

Do's and Don'ts of Product Owner

Roman Pichler described in his book *Agile Product Management with Scrum: Creating Products that Customers Love*⁴ a set of dos and don'ts a good product owner must consider.

Dos	Don'ts
Say what needs to get done.	Say how to do it or how much it will take.
Challenge the team.	Bully the team.
Get interested in building a high-performance team.	Focus on short-term deliveries only.
Practice Business-value-driven thinking.	Stick to the original scope and approach "no matter what."
Protect the team from outside noise.	Worry the team with changes that might happen, until they become real.
Incorporate change between the Sprints.	Allow change to creep into sprints.

⁴ Pichler, Roman. *Agile Product Management with Scrum: Creating Products that Customers Love*. Addison-Wesley Signature Series, 1st Edition

Avoiding the Product Owner anti-pattern rabbit hole

Platinum Edge⁵ offers some PO anti-patterns and what you can do to avoid them.

Product Owner anti-pattern	How to avoid
Multiple product owners, one product	Identify and empower a single product owner as the decision-maker for each product.
One product owner, multiple products	Empower one person per product who can be decisive in prioritizing and working collaboratively with the scrum team, customer, and stakeholders.
Lack of availability	Establish (or reestablish) expectations throughout the organization that the product owner role is essential for scrum team success. Also, take inventory of all the product owner's other responsibilities that cause their lack of availability.
Proxy product owner	There should be one fully empowered product owner for the product.
Overlapping roles	Scrum roles should be independent, individual, and peers, counterbalancing each other for the best collaboration possible. The product owner should represent the customer directly, be intimately aware of their needs, and accountable to the business for achieving the desired outcomes.
Not engaging in sprint retrospective	The product owner must be a full scrum team member and should attend every sprint retrospective.
Poor management of the product backlog	The product owner must work regularly and consistently with the development team to continually refine the product backlog.
Inadequate feature slicing	Slice items vertically to be independently valuable and technical.
Prioritizing output > outcome	The product owner should focus on outcome-based metrics.

⁵ <https://platinumedge.com/blog/common-product-ownership-anti-patterns-and-how-avoid-them>

Five-legged sheep

The ideal product owner can therefore justifiably be called a five-legged sheep. If an organization has the right mindset and the product owner comes from the business side, has the right competencies, applies the right do's, and avoids the PO anti patterns rabbit hole, an important precondition for successful product delivery has been met.

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series

This article is part of a series of articles called *Sensemaking in the Agile Forest*. This series⁶ consists of the following parts:

- What is Agile?⁷
- What is Scrum?⁸
- Is Agile always better?⁹
- The ideal Product Owner
- The ideal Scrum Master
- Is an agile team always autonomous?
- What do iterative and incremental mean in Agile?
- The Minimum Viable Product (MVP) unraveled
- Prioritizing in an agile team (MoSCoW, WSJF)
- Multitasking task switching or monotasking
- Being predictable as an agile team (story points, velocity, t-shirt sizing, flying fingers)
- Self-managing or self-organizing agile teams
- Slicing user stories
- Agile management products (burn-down and burn-up charts)
- Agile user testing (cohorts, A/B testing)
- The Kanban board (WIP-limit, cumulative flow diagram)
- Culture makes or breaks your agile transformation
- Getting started as an agile team (a pilot)
- The evolution of agile frameworks

⁶ This series is based on a number of short blogs I made for Forsa Advies, a project management training organization in the Netherlands (<https://www.forsa-advies.nl>).

⁷ Portman, H. (2022). What is Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue I, January. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/pmwj113-Jan2022-Portman-what-is-agile-sensemaking-in-the-agile-forest-series-article1.pdf>

⁸ Portman, H. (2022). What is Scrum? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article 2, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue II, February. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/pmwj114-Feb2022-Portman-What-is-Scrum-sensemaking-in-the-agile-forest-series-article2.pdf>

⁹ Portman, H. (2022). Is agile always better? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue III, March. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/pmwj115-Mar2022-Portman-Is-Agile-always-better-sensemaking-series-3.pdf>

Please let me know if you would like to add specific agile topics to this series.

About the Author



Henny Portman

The Netherlands



Henny Portman, owner of Portman PM[O] Consultancy and was partner of HWP Consulting, has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, program, and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches, and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional (PM(O)) communities.

Henny Portman is/was accredited in a variety of qualifications, including P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and an SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant (PMO Global Alliance). On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition to this, he is an international speaker, author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field, and an active blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com/).

Henny can be contacted at henny.portman@gmail.com.