

# The Product Owner

By Dick Carlson



### Introduction

The Product Owner plays a strategic role in Scrum. The Product Owner defines product requirements, collaborates with key stakeholders on releases of product functionality, release dates, and content of the product, prioritizes requirements based on highest business value, adjusts requirements and their priorities every sprint, and accepts or rejects work results and the end of every sprint. The Product Owner redefines the relationship between business and IT. In Scrum, requirements that are critically needed to meet the goals of the first release and possibly the second release are defined and developed. In Scrum, management of the project may not be delegated to a project manager, with the customer representative disengaging from the process.

Instead, the Product Owner communicates customer or user needs, guides each release, and collaborates closely and continuously with the team and the stakeholders. The Product Owner acts as the glue between end-users, product management, development, and stakeholders creating alignment by making sure everyone is pulling toward the same goal. So, the Product Owner must learn *systems thinking*, a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems.

### The Value of the Product Owner

The Product Owner is responsible for understanding and communicating customer needs. The Product Owner is the one who develops and communicates the product vision together with the value proposition of the software. Scrum books tell us that the Product Owner populates the product backlog and refines its contents on an ongoing basis: new requirements are added, existing ones are refined – typically just-in-time, before the next sprint planning meeting. In my experience, especially on large projects, the Product Owner should not populate the product backlog alone. Rather, as the backlog is populated with high-level functionality (epics), with support from program domain and subject-matter experts, the team can also help by decomposing some of the larger epics into smaller epics and stories. When requirements are expressed in “shall statement” format, system engineers, who are not “Agilists” are not expected to translate shall statements from high-level specifications into user stories. However, if the system engineers closely collaborate with project team members, they will eventually appreciate the advantages and simplicity of writing user stories. The Product Owner is responsible for prioritizing product backlog items to assure that the most important requirements are always worked on first.

Scrum books also teach us that project success is the Product Owner's primary area of responsibility that includes meeting project goals and financial targets. The Product Owner decides on the functionality, release date, and the budget to maximize customer satisfaction. The Product Owner also creates and updates the release plan and the release reports, attends all Scrum meetings, is available to the team to answer questions and clarify customer needs, and proactively manages stakeholder interests.

The Scrum approach to managing software projects is proving to be a valuable element for project success, and paramount to product quality. The success of the Product Owner role on projects that I have coached has been technical knowledge and availability. These two elements

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have enabled the sprint team to define user stories at an appropriate level of granularity needed to populate product backlog items from documents containing “shall” statements into clear, concise, and unambiguous user stories.

The Product Owner collaborates with the team and aligns with the stakeholders throughout the entire release. [Note: The term “release” for our project meant that a product backlog item(s) for a development sprint was complete verified that it was “Done”. The term “Done” is the team’s way of communicating to the customer that functionality was ready and available for immediate use. It can also mean that a user story or an increment of partial functionality was ready and available for system testing.] The Product Owner and the team define and develop requirements together. The Product Owner clarifies requirements when questions arise and reviews the work results using the agreed-upon “Done” criteria. The Product Owner prepares for the sprint-planning meeting and according to the Scrum books, decomposes requirements prior to the meeting, thereby creating a smooth workflow for the team. For a requirements sprint, we found that the decomposition of requirements from shall statements takes place as a detailed and close collaboration of both the Product Owner and team (i.e. the team consisting of domain and subject-matter experts).

### **The Role of the Product Owner**

Scrum tells us that the Product Owner role may be filled by an end user, product manager, or a customer depending on the nature and size of the project. However, I have found that for some projects, this may not be practical. That is, customers and end users may not be able to devote a full-time person to support the role. For example, a product manager may not know the requirements in sufficient detail to define and develop requirements. There are three critical aspects to consider when implementing the Product Owner role:

1. The Product Owner must be empowered:
  - Empowerment means having the authority to make decisions and taking on responsibility for their consequences. It means being able to make decisions quickly, without getting approval from management every time a decision has to be made. If the Product Owner leads an important project, the individual should be sponsored directly by senior management. Additionally, the Product Owner should be actively involved in setting the release goal, thus allowing the individual to be fully responsible for reaching the goal.
2. The Product Owner must have enough time to do the job:
  - Inadequate Product Owner availability adversely impacts the project's productivity. Necessary preparation work may not get done and critical decisions may be delayed. Product Owners that can only attend sprint planning and sprint review meetings will find it difficult to answer questions promptly and thoroughly. They will miss out on a continuous collaboration with the team and weaken their ability to guide the project. The team’s productivity may also be adversely affected.
3. The Product Owner must be properly qualified:
  - Having the right qualifications implies two things: A thorough understanding of customer needs, and a working knowledge of Scrum. The latter includes being able to implement

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relevant practices such as filling and refining (or grooming) the product backlog effectively, or describing requirements in the form of user stories. Product Owners need to be properly trained in Scrum to do their job well – just like Scrum Masters. Often, a combination of a Scrum Product Owner course and on-the-job training works best.

Key points to Product Owner effectiveness:

- Ensure management is clear about the importance of the role and that they carefully select qualified individuals to serve as Product Owners.
- Allow Product Owners to spend most of their time being the Product Owner, freeing them from other duties.
- Embrace a longer-term perspective by developing Product Owners. That is, invest in those individuals so that they are prepared to take on the Product Owner role. This may include formal training and establishing recurring in-house training and coaching capabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The Product Owner is responsible for working with stakeholders and customers to develop a product backlog that is decomposed into small pieces, clear to the developers, immediately actionable, estimated in points by the team that will implement it, and testable, where acceptance tests that determine whether a backlog item is done must be clearly defined. A strong definition of “Done” that is continuously improved is a hallmark of a high performing Agile team.

Most Product Owners may not be executives in their organizations, but they must learn how to transform a culture from its expensive and obsolete way of thinking to leaner ways of doing things through systems thinking. Some of the most important attributes of a good Product Owner include:

- Forward-thinking visionary
- Leader and team player
- Well-informed
- Empowered to do what needs to be done
- Available when needed
- Understanding the voice of the customer
- Respectful to the team
- Knowing what customer value means
- Commitment
- Scrum advocate
- Communicator
- Negotiator
- Qualified
- Prepared

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### **About the Author**

Dick Carlson has been an active Agile transformational leader for many small and large projects, and has frequently shared his experiences of successful Agile, Lean, and Scrum implementations at conferences, workshops, and symposia, and regularly advises executives and organizational leaders on the cost, quality, and schedule benefits of using those initiatives and techniques. He has actively coached teams for more than 20 years on Agile and Lean Project Management fundamentals, and follows up with mentoring activities to ensure successful project execution. Dick has also provided concentrated Agile coaching support and led many organizations, programs, and projects that varied in size from six to more than 2,000 engineers, and that ranged in costs from under \$50,000 to more than \$1.4B.

Dick used Scrum practices and principles to manage and form the start-up of the Agile & Lean Education Associates (ALEA) Company that began July 2013. He continues to share his practical knowledge of Agile, Lean, and Scrum through more than two decades of experience by means of Agile and Lean training and the right amount of coaching to companies and other activities that want to increase their competitive advantage. The ALEA Company website (<http://www.a2zalea.com>) provides information about who we are and what we do.