

Guide for a New Product Owner

This guide helps you to jump right into the Product Owner's shoes



Introduction

What is this guide?

Product Owner's job is not easy. Managing stakeholders, prioritizing backlog, communicating with the team, customers and stakeholders, defect management, road mapping and vision creation, coordinating work and all the ceremonies and meeting where you should participate. Wow! Exhaustive! Don't worry, we have listed the first 10 steps for you. This way you can focus on the most important things first. After taking the first steps, you can expand your view and proceed deeper into the Product Owner's world.

Who is this for?

This guide is meant especially for persons who are just about to start in the Product Owners position. Experienced Product Owners may get some ideas and inspiration from this guide as well.

How to use this guide?

Read this guide through and follow the 10 steps in your work as a Product Owner. Remember that this guide gives you only the first ten steps and is just a beginning of the long learning journey . This guide has been formatted so that you can print it out as well. In the end of this presentation, you will find the checklist. Keep this checklist near your desk and mark each item done, when you have completed it.

10-Step Checklist for a New Product Owner

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Make sure you can use enough time for the role

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Make sure you have direct contact to the development team

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Ask and listen to feedback for your work, and thank and value team achievements.

Product Owner's Task List:

- **Team Collaboration:** Participation to the Agile ceremonies. Release and Sprint outcome acceptance. Responding to the team's questions and concerns.
- **Product and Team Backlog Management:** Backlog refinement and prioritization. Organizing Sprint Planning sessions.
- **Stakeholder Management.** Identification of the stakeholders and their needs. Regular communication of the development progress and release schedules.
- **Customer Communication.** Regular customer contacting. Customer presentations. Single point of contact for any product related questions.
- **Defect Management.** Makes sure that the quality of the product will remain high. Ensures that the defects are prioritized and fixed accordingly.
- **Road Mapping and Visio Creation.** Long term plans and product vision. Release scope and vision. Sprint goals.
- **Coordination.** Multi-team development coordination e.g., with project management. Coordination of the work with e.g., sales, marketing and customer support.
- **Continuous Learning**
- **Maintain a Positive Atmosphere**



Make sure you can use enough time for the role

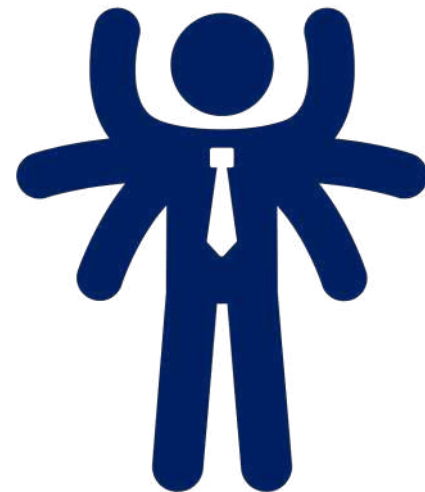
To ensure that the maximum value is gained with minimum effort it is important that the Product Owner can focus on the job. At minimum, the role takes 1-2 days a week. We recommend that you should have at least 40% allocation to work with the Product Owner role. In most cases the Product Owner role is a full-time job.

Few thoughts and reminders what comes to the time and task management

24 hours is the same for all. By prioritizing your tasks, you can achieve more things that are valuable. Remember to say no to those requests that are not important. Saying 'no' is one the most important skills you need to learn as a Product Owner.

What may happen if you don't have enough time?

You could also ask that what could happen, if there would be no Product Owner? PO is the one who makes sure that the team focuses on developing the most valuable outcomes. The focus setting work is continuous. If it is not done well, the team might slip on the track and the development focus might shift to secondary activities.



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Learn about the Product Owner's role from The Scrum Guide

If you don't know yet anything about the Scrum nor about the Product Owner's role, you should get familiar with the Scrum Guide. The guide is about 30 pages. You will find this guide useful even if your team is utilizing Kanban. Naturally, there are plenty of other books and information sources to learn about the PO's role, but this one is a compact and free guide.

From Authors of the Scrum Guide:

Scrum is defined completely in the Scrum Guide by Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland, the originators of Scrum. The Scrum Guide is maintained independently of any company or vendor and therefore lives on a brand neutral site. The Scrum Guide is translated and available in over 30 languages. You can read and [download the Scrum Guide here](#).

Further reading for a new Product Owner:

- Marty Cagan: Inspired: How to create tech products that customers love
- Daniel Coyle: The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups
- Simon Sinek: Start with Why
- Shawn Achor: The Happiness Advantage
- Arto Kiiskinen: 8 simple secrets of product owner success





Make sure you have direct contact to the development team

Continuous communication with the team will improve the chances of succeeding. Identification of the valuable things and potential risks are communicated faster if you collaborate and communicate actively with the team. As a product owner you should be available for the team whenever they have doubts or questions.

How to collaborate with the team in practice?

If you are doing Scrum, as a product owner you should participate to the Agile Ceremonies to regularly communicate with the team. Ceremonies such as backlog refinement, sprint planning, sprint reviews and demos are events, which you should always participate to. You may attend to the team's daily sessions as well. However, remember that the daily meetings focus is on the team's work. A good practice is to organize Product Owner's Q&A session after each daily-meeting for instance. And finally, do not forget the importance of informal discussions as well.

What if the communication is insufficient?

If you are lacking communication with the team, the development team might lose its focus and might produce fewer valuable outcomes. One of the key things for success is efficient communication!



AGILE CEREMONIES

- **Backlog Refinement:** Regular meeting to improve the top of the backlog, and maintain the rest of the backlog
- **Sprint Planning:** At start of sprint, the team and Product Owner get together to plan and commit what can be done in the coming sprint.
- **Daily,** A short, daily meeting where team self-organizes what has been completed, what is started next, and keeps work going forward.
- **Retrospective.** Regular meeting that reflects on past work and finds out better ways to do things.
- **Sprint Review.** At the completion of the sprint, the team and PO get together to review done and not done items and reflect on learnings and big picture.
- **Demo:** Team presents complete work to stakeholders to get feedback.



Identify the product stakeholders and meet up with them

Who are the stakeholders?

First, you should identify that who are your product stakeholders. Typically, they are your company's business units, partners, teams, user groups or internal experts. You don't want to miss any important stakeholder. You might lose some important requirement sources, if you do not identify and collaborate with all the key stakeholders.

How to collaborate with the stakeholders?

You want to collaborate efficiently with your stakeholders. As Product Owner it is important that you utilize clear practices and tools for managing your relationships and information. Typically, Product Owner is a single point of contact for any questions related to the product. It may be a difficult and laborious job, but it may be also a key to success. Check for the steps below to get started.

In practice, you should send newsletters about the development progress and organize demonstrations. Many times, it is more efficient to organize one-on-one meetings instead of large meetings. So, focus more on the personal meetings, since they provide more detailed information about the specific needs of each stakeholder. Remember to document the needs and add the relevant ones to the product backlog. Communicate clearly and honestly, which items will be done, and which will not be done.



Stakeholder collaboration steps:

1. Identify your stakeholders
2. Understand your stakeholders and their priorities
3. Document their needs
4. Analyze the stakeholder's interest and influence
5. Manage the stakeholder expectations
6. Keep you stakeholders in the loop



Build direct contact to end customers

Customer is in the heart of the agile development. You want to identify your customer and get as good understanding as possible of their needs and what they value. You want to get customer feedback during your development to get the best result. In Scrum for instance, the Product Owner is the one who is accountable managing the customer relationships.

How should you interact with the customer?

There are plenty of ways how you can interact with your customer:

1. You can ask customer feedback regularly through formal and informal **conversations**.
2. On top of the verbal communication, it is important to have **documented** information sharing for instance about needs and outcome expectations.
3. You can integrate the customer feedback to the development Sprints. In practice, you request your customer to participate to the **Demo** session.
4. Customer can be engaged **at any time** when needed. Do not stick only with the scheduled sessions. Communicate with your customer when ever you seem it is important.

As Product Owner you want to make sure that you'll get enough feedback from the customers during the development work. There are plenty of tools that how you can communicate your development work and progress. For instance, *User Story Mapping* is an efficient way to engage stakeholders and customers. *Burn up* and *burn down* charts plus *Kanban boards* are also very useful tools for progress communication. Keeping things transparent is the key for great communication.





Get familiar with the product that you are building

Start by having conversations

Start familiarizing yourself by having conversations with your key stakeholders, with you team and with your customers. Start with the conversations instead of reading the product documentation. Team will provide the technical understanding of the product. Stakeholders and customers will give you their point of view of the product and their expectations. This is a good chance to ask for any feedback, since you are now a new person and do not have any burden from the past.

Use your product

You should familiarize yourself also by using the product. Prioritization is under your responsibility and you can do it, only if you will know your product. Try the product out and use it continuously, so that you know about its old and new features.

Get familiar with the product documentation

After having the conversations and using the product, you should get familiar with the product documentation. Now you can learn more about the product specifics. Compare the information, which you learned through the conversations and usage and you can reflect it to the content of the product documentation. You may ask the question that is the product matching to the current needs and expectations, which our customers and stakeholders have?



Product and Project Documentation

- Product Backlog: Epics, User stories, Tasks, Defects
- Any existing product documentation such as requirements, design and architecture, UX design, test plans, end-user manuals
- Product and release roadmaps



If you get a legacy backlog, it will require cleaning

Clean up the backlog

Since you are responsible of the product backlog, you want to make sure that it is tidy. All the unnecessary items should be removed from the backlog. With regular backlog grooming or refinement sessions you can keep your backlog prioritized and so that it contains valid items only. If the backlog, which you'll inherit, is in bad condition, you may need to start with many intensive refinement sessions. These grooming sessions may take place short time window in order to get the backlog under control. Remember that learning to say no is an important skill for a Product Owner. If any of the backlog items is not to be implemented any time soon or most likely not at all – then it should be removed from the backlog completely. Nice-to-have items shall be added to a separate wish list.

In case, you start with empty product backlog: build it up with the team using the *User Story Mapping* – method.

Refine the backlog

The topmost items in the backlog should be refined in that kind of shape, that they can be considered as 'ready'. This means that they are ready for the development. You don't want to waste the development team's time with vague requests, which basically are impossible to be implemented without having further conversations. You can organize backlog refinement sessions regularly - for instance on weekly basis. Another approach may be that you refine the backlog based on demand without regular scheduling.





Always think about what is most important work right now and next.

Focus on prioritizing the most valuable outcomes

Prioritization is a challenging task. Remember that it is one of the most important tasks for the Product Owner. You should learn some prioritization techniques to reduce the pain. The better you understand your customers and your product – the better chances you you'll have in prioritizing the right things.

If you're using Scrum, prepare the new Sprints by thinking about what's most important right now - and suggest about the content of the sprint to your team. Deliver only well-defined work to the team. Every story should be discussed with the team before the implementation starts.

Prioritization Technique examples:

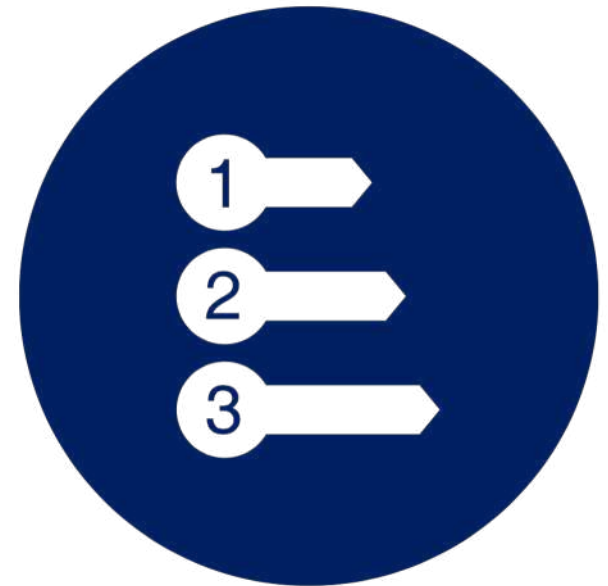
- In-or-Out
- Dot Voting
- MoSCoW
- 100\$
- WSJF

Some thoughts about prioritization

- Everything cannot be fitted in to the next release
- 24 hours is same for all
- All the requirements are not mandatory
- If prioritization is not done in the beginning, then it will be done near the deadlines

Prioritization is

- About learning to say No
- Focusing on outcomes not tasks
- About being realistic
- Continuous work





Don't take technical debt

What is technical debt?

Technical debt is basically friction. The reason for the friction may be due shortcuts in the code, bad quality code or unnecessary temporary workarounds been taken for example. It is common mistake for inexperienced teams and Product Owners to rush in implementing feature count instead of feature health and quality.

How you can avoid it?

As a product owner you should be interested about the technical debt been taken. Significant amount of technical debt will slow your team's ability to deliver high quality outcomes. You should give time to the development team to stabilize the code and perform refactoring when seen as important.

What to do if there is a lot of technical debt already been taken?

First, how do you know if there is a lot of technical debt been taken? There are many practical ways to measure the possible technical debt. Here are some examples:

1. *Release Stabilization time.* The time when developers tell the product is ready to be released and the actual release date - after fixing all the issues.
2. *Defect Trends.* The trend indicates the number of open defects within certain time period.
3. *Mean Defect Fix time.* The average time from defect detection to the fix.

Previously mentioned indicators may give you a sign if technical debt has been taken. Consequently, corrective actions should take place, if for instance the defect trends are pointing out upwards. Once you have identified that technical debt is an issue, make it visible on the product backlog.



"Technical debt is like a loan. The longer you postpone paying it back, the more interest you pay"



Ask and listen to feedback for your work and thank and value team achievements.

Ask feedback

Every now and then it is important to ask feedback of your own performance. Product Owners job is not easy. During the first year you may have many bumps in the road. Don't let them discourage you. By asking direct feedback from the team, stakeholders and even from the customer is something that you should do occasionally. Ask about how you have been doing with prioritization and story definition work. You'll be surprised how big impact it has on your collaboration with all the other people when you ask from others, that how you can improve your ways of work.

Value team achievements

One of the most important reasons for the workers to leave their jobs is that they don't feel appreciated. Studies also indicate that more than half of the employees haven't received any feedback over the past year. You want to provide meaningful recognition for the team and each team member to make them feel valuable and important. Happier team will provide better outcomes.

The recognition can be done when something small or big has been achieved. Typically, product launches or big releases are reasons for celebration. However, do not forget to celebrate smaller achievements as well. For instance, if you have a prolonged defect that has been bothering your development for a while and finally it has been fixed – you should appreciate and recognize teams' great effort.

Keep the team happy with small gestures such as offering fruits and sweets, organizing common lunch and varying the location where the regular meetings are held. Remember team building! Smile! A positive team is more self-directed, more creative, mutually supportive, and dares to take risks when needed.



Finally, let's revise the Product Owner's primary tasks



Team Collaboration: Participation to the Agile ceremonies. Release and Sprint outcome acceptance. Responding to the team's questions and concerns.



Product and Team Backlog Management: Backlog refinement and prioritization. Organizing Sprint Planning sessions.



Stakeholder Management: Identification of the stakeholders and their needs. Regular communication of the development progress and release schedules.



Customer Communication: Regular customer contacting. Customer presentations. Single point of contact for any product related questions.



Defect Management: Makes sure that the quality of the product will remain high. Ensures that the defects are prioritized and fixed accordingly



Road Mapping and Vision Creation: Long term plans and product vision. Release scope and vision. Sprint goals.



Coordination. Multi-team development coordination e.g., with project management. Coordination of the work with e.g., sales, marketing and customer support.



Continuous Learning



Maintain a Positive Atmosphere

Further Reading

Useful links for a new Product Owner:

- Agile Ceremony Improvement Guide **EN**. [Link to the material](#).
- Product Owner – Do not forget the Definition of Done **FIN**. [Link to the webpage](#).
- Scrum Master and Product Owner Collaboration **FIN**. [Link to the webpage](#).
- All you wanted to know about Product Owner role **FIN**. [Link to the webpage](#).
- ContriByte's World Class Product Owner -training. [Link to the webpage](#).

Books for a new Product Owner:

- Marty Cagan: Inspired: How to create tech products that customers love
- Daniel Coyle: The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups
- Simon Sinek: Start with Why
- Shawn Achor: The Happiness Advantage
- Arto Kiiskinen: 8 simple secrets of product owner success



Details and Printable material

Checklist for a new product owner



Contribyte New Product Owner

CHECKLIST

- ☐ I have at least 40% allocation for the Product Owner role
- ☐ I have read the Scrum Guide or any other relevant book regarding to the Agile development and Product Owner role
- ☐ I have direct contact to the development team and participated to some of the ceremonies as well
- ☐ I have met up with the key stakeholders and had conversation about their expectations for the product
- ☐ I have introduced myself to few key customers and talked to them about the product and their expectations
- ☐ I have studied the product, so that I can understand the key features and what creates the value in the product
- ☐ I have started backlog refinement process and will continue refining it regularly
- ☐ I have prioritized the product backlog in collaboration with the key stakeholders and all the relevant experts
- ☐ I have had a conversation with the team about technical debt and established meter(s) for indicating it
- ☐ I have already asked feedback of my ways of work
- ☐ I have given credit to the team for their achievements

Contribyte

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About Contribyte

Contribyte is the coach of winning product organizations and teams of the future. We help organizations become better in product development.

Contribyte also trains product leaders, product managers, product owners, scrum masters and development teams. Our coaches have years of experience in improving product development team practices and product creation processes.

Read our blogs and subscribe our newsletter here: <https://contribyte.fi/ajatuksia/tutblogi/>

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