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PRODUCT

Climbing the product career ladder

Part 1: Associates, juniors, and product managers

It's human nature to set goals when starting a new role or career, and many of you will currently be evaluating how you want your career to progress over the coming years. This three-part series aims to show product managers, wherever they currently are on the career ladder, how to reach the next rung.

The starting point for this series is a post written by Mind the Product Co-Founder and former Chairman, Martin Eriksson, in 2018 – Product management job titles and hierarchy. Martin sought to bring some clarity to the confusion around product management job titles, seniority, and hierarchy and his post has proved a consistently popular reference for the Mind the Product community.

With that post in mind, this series looks first at associate, junior, and product manager jobs, then at senior, product lead, and product director roles, and finally at head, VP of product, and CPO roles. We'll look at what's expected at each level, what challenges you might be faced with, what skills you need to succeed, and any practical steps you can take to move up the career ladder.

Contents

Associate and junior product management roles

Starting out can be tough, but there are different ways to land a first job

This first guide has proved to be the hardest to pull together. While the product management discipline might be 20-plus years old, it seems that generally, businesses want to hire product managers, rather than start them off.

It seems that graduate awareness of product management as a potential career isn't all that it might be, as Thor Mitchell, Head of Product, Developer Platform at Miro, explains. His interest in recruiting graduates as proto-product managers started around 2015 when he returned to the UK after a long stint working for Google in Silicon Valley where he'd worked with a number of "phenomenal" associate product managers. He was at a startup, looking to build a team, and had his pick of universities. He spoke to lots of highly talented STEM graduates but found that a product manager role didn't resonate with them. "I had no trouble finding an experienced product manager, but found it really hard to recruit for entry-level jobs. Back then, no graduates knew what product management was. They didn't recognise the job title when it turned up in a listing."

Awareness of product management among UK universities has improved somewhat since then – Thor has done his bit to raise awareness by forging strong links with the Saïd Business School in Oxford, and Imperial College London, for example. He's also given talks at ProductTanks, published a number of blog posts, and been interviewed on our podcast as part of this effort.

More from Thor ↗

🎧 Moving up the career ladder

▷ In my humble opinion

▷ From start-up to scale-up

Graduate trainee schemes and internships

If you're at the start of your product career, where do you begin?

More specifically, if you're just leaving university, where do you go? It can be tough to find a first role as a product manager if you're straight out of university with no experience under your belt.

There are some internship and trainee schemes around for graduates. Some of the big tech companies run excellent graduate training schemes and paid internships, though they're not necessarily for product management – you can find details of some of those who say they run product management schemes in this post, 11 product management graduate schemes. The best known, Google's highly-regarded two-year graduate training scheme – the Associate Product Manager Program that Thor Mitchell mentions – has been running for over 20 years, but, according to Google's published information, the program only takes on about 45 graduates a year, and we have so far been unable to discover how far it extends outside the US.

This post from Nikita Mallya, What I learned after bombing my Google APM interview will give you an insight into the Google hiring process, and this post, Google APM Interview: the Only Post You'll Need to Read, is useful reading for anyone considering an application to Google or any other internship.
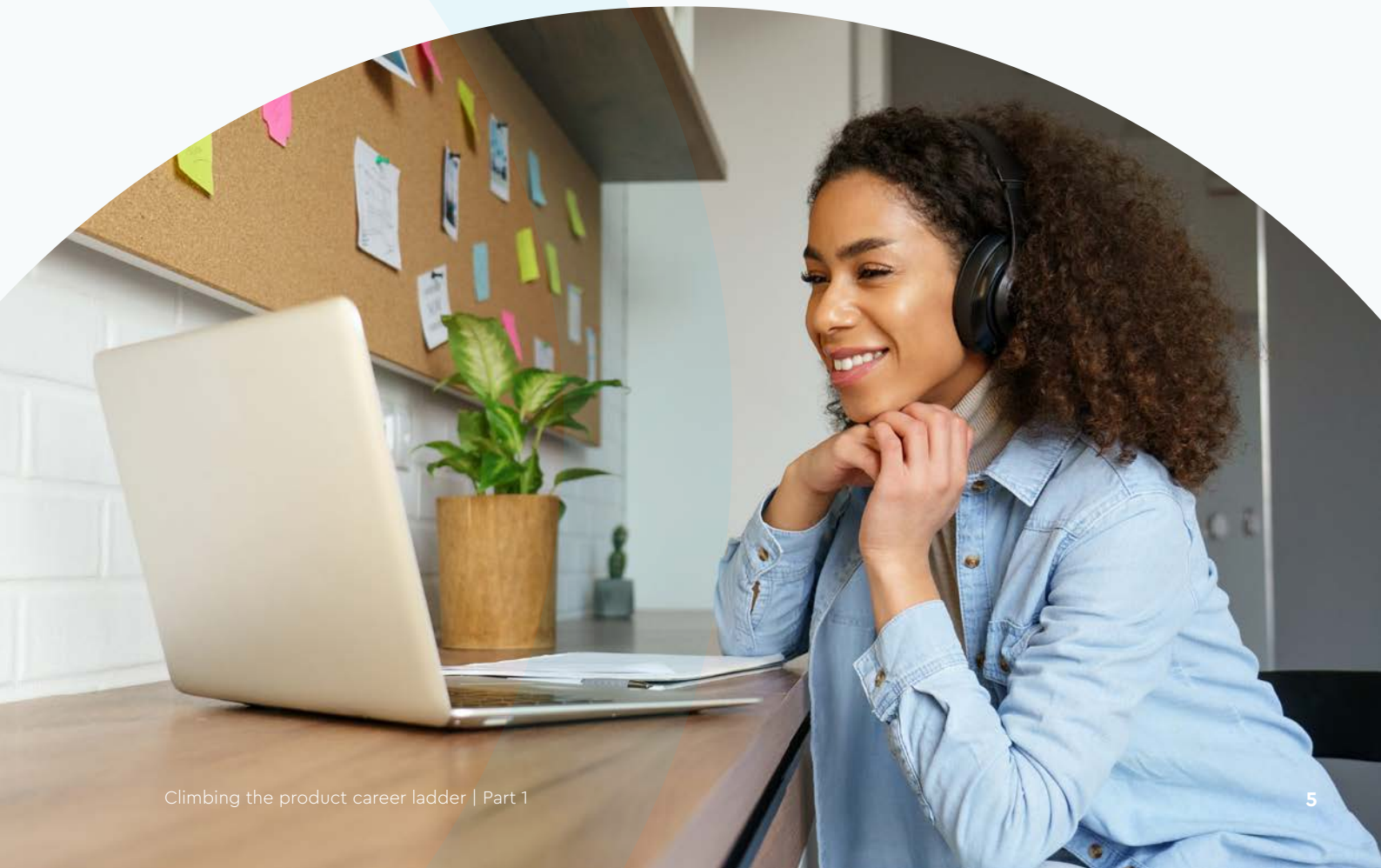
Does an MBA make a difference?

A career in product management is now a popular choice for business school graduates, as the Wall Street Journal and other business publications have noticed. Likewise, a few years ago US business schools began to wake up to the potential of the discipline and they are now awash with courses aimed at giving students a clearer path to product management careers in tech companies.

But MBAs are expensive to acquire and go in and out of fashion in tech companies. "You tend to find, especially with business school candidates, that they've bought into the mythology of Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Amazon and Apple, and they are the only companies they need to consider," says Thor. "So I tell them that they're making their lives very difficult if they confine their applications to these companies – the roles are incredibly competitive, and they've only got one shot at them, as these companies only hire graduates at certain times of the year." Graduate schemes typically have a set period for applications, often kicking off in the September of the previous year.

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Thor Mitchell, Head of Product, Developer Platform at Miro
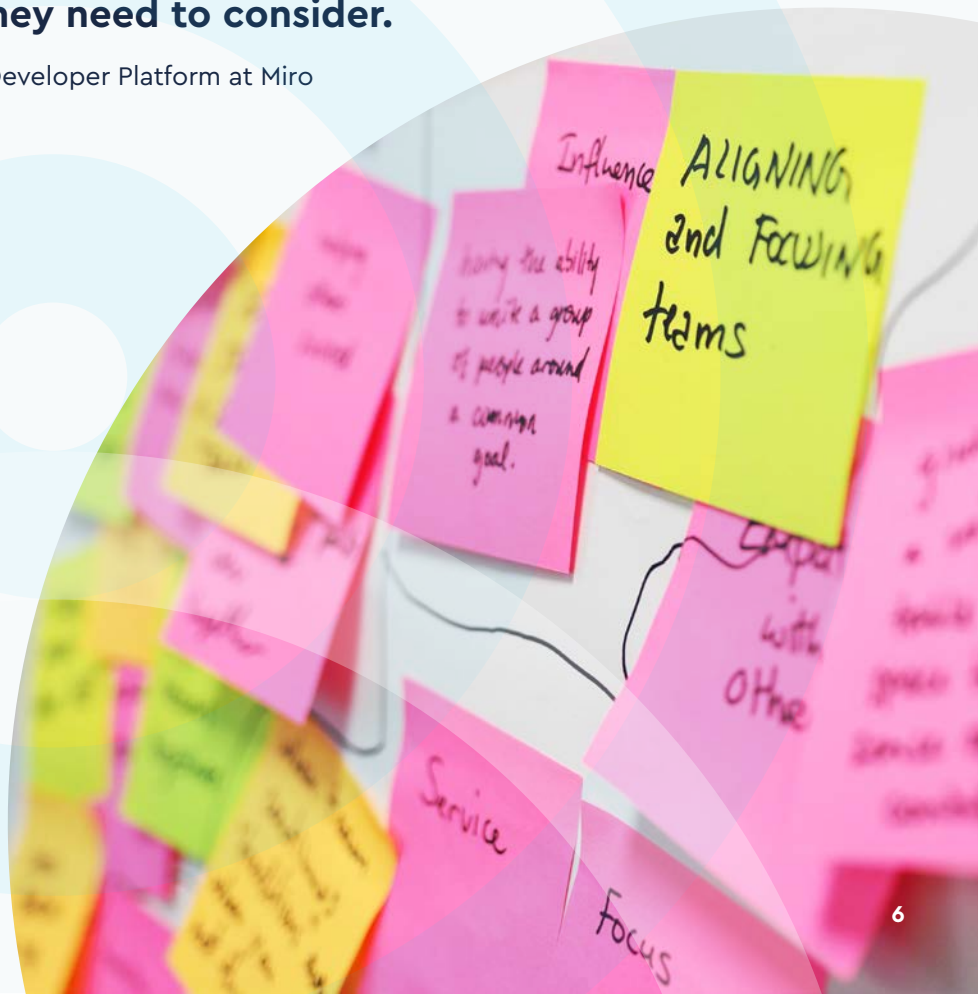
Alternative routes to your first product job

Look for small but growing companies and consider adjacent roles

Thor thinks there may be better places to learn other than big tech if you want to get ahead and learn quickly: "They're great companies, but you will be a small cog in a large machine, and you'll have a very tightly defined scope. Whereas in a growth-stage startup, you'll be asked to do loads of things you don't know how to do and you'll get lifted up as it grows. So working at a company that's growing quickly but isn't yet a mega corporation is, I think, a better choice for career development." This Minimum viable product manager talk from Susana Videira Lopes examines how someone might progress more quickly in a smaller company. She shares two stories she hopes will empower those in their early product careers to make their own luck and to spot the opportunities that will take them up that ladder faster.

Thor says: "In a previous role, I was based on the Exeter University science park and got involved with the university's student mentorship program which pairs students up with people in industry. I mentored probably 12 or so people over the years, and many of them decided they wanted to become product managers. Most of them succeeded in getting a job, but it took a bit of work to find companies who were open to it."

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>
> **Thor Mitchell**, Head of Product, Developer Platform at Miro

Be prepared to make a transition

This is why finding a way into a business through an adjacent role, and then making the transition to product management may be the best route for many would-be product managers. Shaun Russell looks at this in his recent #mtpcon talk, How successful product people develop, and in this Mind the Product post, Transitioning to product from a functional role, product coach Joni Hoadley says she spent 10 years working in marketing before moving to a product role. She says: "I had never worked as a product manager before so I had to find someone willing to take a chance on me. As the first and only product manager, I had no one to show me how to do product management. I had to teach myself."

Thor adds that some companies have junior product manager or APM roles, but they tend to be larger companies of over 500 people who can afford the time to mentor younger staff. "Others, for example, will advertise for product analysts, which is a way of saying someone who's junior and not yet a manager, but it's an on-ramp for product management."

> **I had no one to show me how to do product management. I had to teach myself.**

Joni Hoadley, Product Management Coach

Always be on the lookout for opportunities

He advises graduates looking for a foot in the door to try and identify companies with strong product teams and then to look for opportunities in the company that interact with the product team in some way. This means engaging with the product community, going to meetups, and keeping an eye on social media channels so you can identify businesses making an effort to build a strong product team. "You may have to accept that you'll spend a couple of years doing something that's adjacent to product management. Once you're in, you can figure out the right people to speak to and let them know you're interested in product management."

Jon Horvath, Senior Product Manager at BibliU and Mind the Product writer, took such an approach. In his first product management role at Benivo, he joined the company as part of its content team but soon realised that product was what he wanted to do. "I was doing technical work, things like looking at areas to automate or ways to expand our content offering, which would then require product work. So I found a lot of the time I was helping to define new features to the product team, or request them from the product team, but as someone working in content, I didn't have much control on which of those features got built or where our priorities were. Then I found one of our product managers was leaving and I realised it was an opportunity I wanted to jump on."

He felt he was a strong candidate because one of the most important attributes of product management is the ability to communicate effectively and clearly – something he was already doing in his content role. "I'd also been managing freelancers so I felt that requirements to freelancers was akin to taking something to developers and having them work on it." He also read a lot about product management and once he had the job he went on a training course that looked at the role of a product manager. He says he's someone who is always looking to learn: "I always want to be working on something new or have something that's exciting that we can drive forward."

Hiring processes could be better

As an aside, Thor points out that there are two facets to hiring graduates – first a company's willingness and then its expertise in hiring them. He had no success when he used the usual product management job boards and only got any interest from candidates when he used graduate job boards and university career centre sites. A company's interview processes may not be welcoming to graduates, Thor warns. He's noticed a shift away from brain teasers and puzzles in interviews to ones that ask candidates to draw on their experiences to explain how they might address a problem. "Graduates don't have that history to draw on," he says. "Do you want them to talk about their computer science coursework? The recruitment process doesn't necessarily help you select the best candidates."

Finding your first product job

Don't be afraid to move around different sizes of company and always demonstrate a learning mindset

During her time at car buying site Cazoo as Head of UX, Saielle DaSilva (now Global VP of Experience Design at StepStone) spoke of how the car buying site made an effort to build a strong product team, and that junior product managers focused on learning their craft.

Saielle looks for a learning mindset when hiring first-timers. "I look for somebody who is actively pursuing knowledge and demonstrating that pursuit, somebody who is flexible and open minded," they say. "You need humility, open-mindedness and openness to feedback when you're learning a craft." Saielle has a list of things to look for that demonstrate this learning mindset: the books a candidate is reading, what else they do to learn, who their heroes are, whose opinions they agree or disagree with: "These are things that show curiosity and engagement in your day-to-day work. If you're going to work as a part of a highly productive and successful team you need to care about and be invested in the industry."

Saielle recommends people bounce between different sizes of company earlier on in their careers, spending time in startups, enterprises, and scale-ups, so that they become well rounded, understand the different pressures in different businesses and know where they thrive.

What's more important, hard or soft skills?

Soft skills are vital – they'll help you to move up the career ladder

Hard skills are about 20% of the job – they're the makings of a solid foundation, but it's the acquisition of soft skills that enable a product manager to move up the career ladder, Saielle says. "Once you have enough of the craft down, you need to learn to anticipate the needs of those you work with, what other people at the table care about, not just what you bring to the table. It's about learning influence and learning how to help shape other product managers and the product culture beyond your immediate team."

Reflecting on her former role at Cazoo, Saielle says how the organisation had a structured career path for its product managers which was based on skills and behaviour rather than time in a job. When she was at the car buying organisation, Saielle explains that the company ran weekly one to ones and strived to foster a learning mindset, with a commitment to a collaborative culture. Saielle worked to help the team understand the sustained behaviours the company looked for so that they had "perspective about where they were performing well, and where they were not".

A couple of years ago, XING's former VP of Product (now CPO, Facelift) Arne Kittler worked with colleagues to put more structure into the product organisation by standardising product roles through the company and introducing greater fairness and transparency. Arne explains how during his time at XING, product jobs were categorised as junior product manager/product fellow, mid-level product manager, senior-level product manager, principal product, team lead product, product director, and VP product, with the core competencies at each level divided into ability to:

- **Create user-centric products**
- **Deliver impact**
- **Understand the market**
- **Embrace engineering**

The expectations at each level are all openly acknowledged and available. Separately the company also introduced transparency into its salary bands, which, as Arne says, nicely complemented the work he and his colleagues did to standardise roles in the product organisation.

A clear picture of expected competencies

Both the clearer competency profiles and the salary transparency helped in setting expectations and empowered more meaningful dialogue between employees and their managers, says Arne reflecting on his time at XING: "This added transparency put our product managers on an equal level with their people managers when they discussed personal and career development."

To give examples of the expectations for junior and mid-level product managers, a junior at XING would help to keep the backlog well-structured, whereas a mid-level product manager would be expected to be responsible for prioritising the backlog. Similarly, a junior product manager would still be developing an understanding about the technology used in their product whereas a mid-level would be able to speak about the technology and understand both positive and negative implications of technical decisions. Says Arne: "It gave our product teams a clearer picture of the differences between the different levels. For example, if you're a senior, you don't just create a roadmap, but you should also make sure that the right people know about it and understand it. It also gave people a clear perspective on the roles they could aspire to."

Arne says the framework provided reassurance for XING's product managers. To this day, the industry has unrealistic expectations about a product manager's knowledge, he says, so it gave people some orientation and reassurance about the level they work at: "I hope that what we implemented at XING takes a bit of this intimidation away."

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This added transparency put our product managers on an equal level with their people managers when discussing their personal and career development.

Arne Kittler, CPO, Facelift and former VP of Product, XING

What makes a successful product manager?

What marks out someone who is – or is going to be – a successful product manager? Skill sets may vary between industries and types of role – marketplace products require different skills from B2B products for example, and someone coming in to a business as its first product hire will have a very different role from someone who comes in to an existing team – but there are some commonalities, as Nick Charalambous, Co-founder of recruiters Few&Far points out. "The people we see progress very quickly are generally very smart, curious problem-solvers with good people skills." Such people also tend to be good storytellers, able to engage people and get buy-in, but who can also step back and look at the big picture. Some of these attributes will come more naturally than others for all of us, but they can all be acquired.

How to set yourself up for success

Be curious, take advantage of available resources, and look to find a mentor

There are other constructive resources for product managers to assess how their skills measure up. Product leadership coach Kate Leto has a series of articles on LinkedIn you can use to help analyse your skills, including, Product EQ Toolkit Part 1: The Product Practice Canvas and Product EQ Toolkit Part 2: Build Essential Product skills with the Product EQ Wheel. Part 2 offers a handy self-reflection exercise you can use to go deeper into understanding and assessing your human skills and emotional intelligence. The skills included: "self awareness, resilience, emotional self control, empathy, adaptability, collaboration, communication – are some of the most essential to our work as product people," says Kate. In addition, Kate offers a number of useful resources, activities and exercises on her website.

Videos and podcasts

If you prefer to learn by listening or watching, here are some other examples:

The Product Experience podcast episode – You are the product with Kristina Walcker-Mayer has useful pointers to help you become more self-aware, and Kristina's talk from MTP Engage Hamburg (Personal growth – the essence of your product career) has lots of constructive advice on what you can do to develop a career plan.

Saielle DaSilva also points out the importance of finding a mentor, adding that they have had different mentors at different stages of their career. As well explaining how he transitioned from engineering to product management, Meroxa CEO DeVaris Brown speaks out on The power of mentoring in another recent episode of The Product Experience: "There's no shortage of shitty PMs right? So, yes there is a need for mentors." He adds that product management means different things to different people: "I know, personally, that looking at A/B experiments and optimising for growth is not the type of product manager that I want to be."

7 early product career tips

That's a whole lot of information to take in, so let's break it down to the very basics with a few quick tips:

1 **Look beyond big tech for your first role** – your work will be more varied and you should progress faster in a smaller company

2 **Be prepared to take an adjacent role** – you can do this for a couple of years before you move into product

3 **Look out for companies committed to product** – those that are passionate about building strong product teams

4 **Embrace a continuous learning mindset** – attending meetups and conferences to seek out more experienced people who can act as mentors is essential

5 **Soft skills are SO important** – regularly assess the areas where you could improve and work with a mentor to improve them

6 **Don't be intimidated, or afraid to fail** – imposter syndrome affects even the most experienced product leaders

7 **Read, read, read...**

Don't forget, there are two more parts of *Climbing the product career ladder* to come...

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Mind the Product is the world's most engaged product management community with regular free ProductTank meetups in over 200 cities, as well as world-class content and resources, and the biggest and best training events, workshops, and annual conferences in London and San Francisco. These are the go-to events for meeting other product people and honing your product craft at all levels (online and in person).

Dive into plenty more resources on how to further your product management craft at mindtheproduct.com