

# Taming the Fuzzy Front End

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Creating products for sale is difficult. Millions of person-hours have honed this mercantile craft into three distinct phases: Product Definition, Product Development, and Commercialization. Product Definition, often referred to as the Fuzzy Front End, remains the most fluid and unstructured of the three. This article examines how product managers and enterprises at large can best tame and harness for competitive advantage the creativity and ambiguity of this critical phase of work. The taming starts with understanding. New product development is always intertwined with innovation. This work is never simple, and while standards and process protocols have created a myriad of templates and best practices over the years, the fuzzy front end serves for many product managers as a test in frustration, or for the optimistic, a lesson in patience. The failure rates associated with weak product definition have led to negative connotations toward the fuzzy front end. However, the fuzzy front end is a natural part of every product life cycle and if managed effectively can provide great opportunity for business and competitive gain. In short, there is no short cutting good product definition and therefore, product managers looking to successfully deploy new products on a consistent basis must learn to harness the innovative engines of their organization. The following are seven criteria for taming the fuzzy front end.

## **One: The Project Manager must be the Glue**

During the Definition Phase, the leader needs to rely less on the ability to manage projects and more on the ability to channel innovation toward product implementation. The product manager adds value in facilitating collaboration between (1) strategic planners who ensure enterprise goals are understood and that the new product effort is aligned to achieve those goals, (2) technologists and innovators who ensure the technology roadmap is understood and supports the new product innovation, and (3) product marketers who share knowledge regarding market trends and niche opportunities. The project manager must become the glue to keep these areas of focus working together to ensure the enterprise remains a market leader.

## **Two: Establish the Product's Success Criteria**

When the new product begins taking form, draft its definition. Be specific, detailed and focused on the relevant business strategies, identify the value proposition and target markets; stake out the window of opportunity and relevant key technologies; define the metrics to match the product success with enterprise goals and objectives. This success criteria will be leveraged during the requirements documentation and product development hence setting targets and boundaries that serve as a guide.

## **Three: Align all Enterprise Roadmaps**

Identify all enterprise roadmaps and their owners. These roadmaps typically include the following functional areas: strategy, marketing, and technology. The goals and objectives of each of these roadmaps must be aligned to optimize

product success. Additionally, these roadmaps must not only align the new product with strategic objectives, but also with customer wants and market needs. This is a major area of concern for many organizations. Roadmap management is too often a concurrent exercise that results in misalignment in one or all of the roadmaps. For example: development of new technologies which customers do not find compelling or that do not support the company's strategic objectives. Product definition should serve as the synch point for roadmap integration.

## **Four: Know the Risks**

For each innovation within an enterprise the risks must not only be identified, they must be known and understood in order to facilitate key trade off decisions. This level of knowledge must be gained for each risk in order to properly determine the nature of risk and probability of both technical and market success. This probability of success can then be used to rank and prioritize the new product in relation to other competing ideas. This risk-based decision making allows executives to render judgments with greater knowledge of the product and its impact across the entire enterprise.

## **Five: Document the Requirements**

Requirements are the basis for planning and as such, poor requirements result in poor planning and poor planning result in poor execution. The later in the product life cycle requirements change, the more expensive the impact becomes. Each stage or iteration in the product life cycle that follows inaccurate requirements results in nearly an exponential increase in costs. This fact puts more pressure squarely on the shoulders of those focused on the product definition.

## **Six: Acquire New Skills**

There is no enterprise that has all necessary skills at all times to address innovation needs. Product managers operating in the fuzzy front end must acquire a different set of skills than those required for managing the back end of a project. So, if the innovation is important enough for the enterprise, get the right skills. Key skills include: facilitation skills, business skills, strategic planning skills, leadership skills and influencing skills, among others. The corollary to this is to strive to leverage the skills and knowledge you already have. Build your core team around the momentum of your organization's direction and focus, and the need to bring in outside experts will be lessened.

## **Seven: Create Enterprise-Wide Knowledge Assets**

Conduct a post-phase audit immediately after exiting the definition phase while key learnings are fresh in people's minds. Concentrate on three or less improvements. Assign action plans to implement the key learnings on future projects. Strive to gain and create concrete knowledge assets, such as copyright-able database schema or a patentable business process.

Successfully launching new products is paramount for the long-term survival of enterprises today. As life cycles continue to face internal and external pressures, there is a growing need to optimize its processes, and to tame its fuzzy front end. These success criteria can help all enterprises, large and small, new and mature.