

Current Position Description and Information

Name: Shane Blackman

Title: Manager, Product Management

Current Affiliation: Capital One Bank

Highest Degree Obtained: Ph.D

Field or sub-discipline (i.e., I/O Psychology, Neuroscience, Social, Clinical): Social Psychology

1. Please provide us a short description of your current position, and the work you do on a daily basis. This will be made available to the attendees on a handout as part of the webinar resources (no more than 250 words is needed):

I manage a team of product managers in the Consumer Bank at Capital One. Each of those product managers works cross-functionally and collaboratively with teammates in design, software engineering, analytics, and data science to develop awesome new digital products and experiences for our Capital One checking and savings customers. As a product leader, I have many different and important responsibilities to create value for my team of product managers that all fall into a few high level buckets: building an awesome team, deciding what we should build, and helping us build it. More specifically, in no particular order: I set and communicate my team's high-level product strategy (i.e., what customer problems should we solve?) to the organization; I establish high-level goals and success metrics for our products/teams; I source and recruit qualified candidates; I coach my team to help grow their skills; I shape culture and fun on the team; I build relationships outside my team and use that perspective to help find useful collaborations; I help clear obstacles to my team's progress; and I help resolve conflict. From a day-to-day perspective, this involves creating useful documents/artifacts to communicate strategy, goals, and progress as well as spending a LOT of time communicating to many diverse audiences in many different ways!

2. In your current job, are there other titles/roles for people doing similar work at other organization, universities, or companies? If so, what are those titles/roles?

Product managers are sometimes labeled *product owners*, but the two titles are often confused, so it's best to clarify with each organization what is in scope for the role. Both are qualitatively different from--but are often confused with--*project managers*. Product management is almost ubiquitous in the tech industry, but such a role does not often exist outside of it unless other organizations are explicitly attempting to adopt the practices, roles, or conventions of the tech industry. The closest related discipline is likely entrepreneurship, as product managers often aspire to be mini-entrepreneurs within an existing company. Anyone who is working to solve other people's/society's problems at massive scale with a particular product or service (usually software) is a product manager at heart, though!

3. What skills and abilities did you learn in your training (i.e., graduate school, postdoctoral experience), do you find are most useful in your job/career?

Several skills that I acquired in graduate school proved to be incredibly valuable for product management. First, rigorous critical thinking skills and finely honed logic form an essential foundation of product management (or any business discipline) and are similarly essential to scientific inquiry. Second, writing, public speaking, and general communication skills honed in academia are very valuable for influencing and inspiring others to collaborate with you. Third, experimental design and statistical inference are very useful in differentiating you from run-of-the-mill product managers, and more

easily facilitate collaboration with analysts, user researchers, and data scientists. Last and not least, academia prepares you for learning new things extremely quickly, and that will be extremely valuable in any career transition to product management. Product management is becoming increasingly scientific--more and more companies are incorporating scaled digital experimentation as a core product management tool--so I expect these skills to continue to rise in demand. Fourth and not least, knowledge of behavioral science and intuition/expertise in predicting human behavior are invaluable for creating great products that normal people will be attracted to and find valuable. Of course, you must deploy the last of these skills very carefully to ensure any behavioral change you encourage is for the betterment of the user and of society!

Career Pathway and Past Experiences

4. How did you get the job you are currently in? Please provide a brief history of your career path/journey. Our attendees are interested in knowing more about how one achieves a current position like yours, and what opportunities or experiences help open doors or create opportunities.

My journey into product management was unconventional, but so is almost everyone's! Nobody (yet) wanted to be a product manager when they grew up; very few people ever studied product management in a formal capacity; and most of us got here by a mix of chance, happenstance, experimentation, and (perhaps) fate. When I earned my Ph.D, I applied to a vast diversity of opportunities--some academic postdoctoral fellowships, nonprofits, think tanks, and even some video game companies! I wanted to apply my skills to interesting work that I felt would have a positive impact on society. I took the summer off to travel, and when I returned to the States in September to look for jobs in earnest, a friend in my cohort who had joined Priceline.com in July reached out to me. She was working there as a "product manager," but really doing the work of a user researcher--that is, she spent her time digging into customer data and conducting studies to help enrich the team's customer intelligence and guide their product strategy and web design. She absolutely raved about the experience, and so I decided to apply myself. It seemed like exciting work where I could have an impact--sometimes it was hard to feel the impact of one's papers in graduate school--and Priceline was keen to bring me on as well. I was eager to apply my research skills, but what happened next was a bizarre twist of fate: when I started, they'd rather I do the job of a "real" product manager. I had no clue what that was, but I was happy to learn on the job. I will be forever grateful to my first engineering team that patiently guided me through all my silly, technology-ignorant questions in the beginning! At the end of the day, I found that I was quite good at product management and ended up really enjoying it. From there, I continued to learn and was given greater and greater responsibility--eventually I came to lead their product analytics team that was responsible for their digital experimentation platform and culture, which I thought was a pretty cool job for a scientist! Ultimately, however, despite my success at Priceline, I wanted to see if I could amplify my impact by working in a sector that has a more direct influence in people's

lives: finance. A former manager of mine at Priceline worked at Capital One, he made the right introductions, and the rest is history!

5. If someone wanted to follow a similar career path to your own, how would you suggest going about it? Please offer specifics/examples whenever possible: (Example: Networking is key. You should join XXXX LinkedIn groups, go to XXXX Meetups and attend XXXX meetings)

The first thing I recommend is purchasing and reading the book The Lean Startup by Eric Reis--this book explains why a scientific mindset and training is incredibly (and increasingly) important to the disciplines of product management and entrepreneurship. Next, I recommend reading Inspired by Marty Cagan for a good general overview of all of the aspects of product management. Once you have a good grounding in the basic knowledge of product management, I would consider attending product meetups (I have enjoyed Mind the Product meetups myself) to network, meet other product managers, and learn from their experiences. Product podcasts (there are many) can help give you perspective as well. Next, you can try to look for a job. The good news is that nobody is trained specifically as a product manager (e.g. in school), so the gap between you and anyone else who wants to break into the field with no professional experience is relatively small. The bad news is that most product management organizations won't hire new PMs with zero product management experience. You can try to get around this three ways: either you can a) try to brand yourself as hard as possible as an aspiring PM and try to sell your existing skills in that light, hoping to essentially find someone willing to take a chance on you (it's possible--it happened to me!); b) use your existing training to get a job in an adjacent field at an established company--software engineering, data science, analytics, or user research are good options for psychologists depending on your skillset--and then transition internally once you've proven your worth; or c) try to join an early-stage startup eager for smart talent (and willing to compromise on experience) and acquire product management experience along the way as you inevitably wear the many different "hats" of startup life. Any product-management side projects you can get into (e.g., making your own app/site with a friend) to grow your skills and demonstrate them to employers are bonus points as well. I've also had colleagues recommend taking product owner/manager and scrum master certifications/courses from General Assembly. We are a discipline of expatriates from other disciplines--that means anyone can potentially join our ranks, but there's no easy and clear path to entry.

6. Are there specific resources for open positions in your career field, and if so what are they?

LinkedIn and AngelList (or other talent sites for startups) are probably your greatest resource, to be honest. The job market currently favors employees, so there are plenty of product management roles posted in the open that are quite visible and easily searchable. I'd be remiss if I didn't refer you to the Capital One careers site as well!