

You have

Agile Development: What is a Product Owner? Roles and Responsibilities?



Lazaro Ibanez

Mar 21, 2019 · 7 min read ★



As described in the *Scrum Guide*, a Scrum Product Owner is responsible for maximising the value of the product resulting from the work of the Development Team. How this is done may vary widely across organisations, Scrum Teams, and individuals.

An agile product owner takes on several roles, including business strategist, product designer, market analyst, customer liaison, and project manager.

The product owner takes the lead in many areas of product development. One day they will need to access their deep well of market knowledge to strategise and present their vision to stakeholders. Another day they will need to roll up their developer sleeves to help the team meet their goals during a sprint.

The Product Owner is one of the main roles in Agile projects. The ultimate responsibility of a Product Owner is to ensure that the product creates value for its customers and users, as well as for the company. “Think of the product owner as the person who champions the product, who facilitates the product decisions, and who has the final say about the product,” he says. “This includes if and how feedback is actioned, and which features are released.”

The role and responsibilities of a Product Owner are too deep so as to make sure he/she understands the core of the product and too wide that collaboration is done at 360-degree level, being a liaison and face of the user.

The PO is one person, not a committee. The Product Owner may represent the desires of a committee in the Product Backlog, but those wanting to change a Product Backlog item’s priority must address the Product Owner.

For the Product Owner to succeed, the entire organisation must respect his or her decisions. The Product Owner’s decisions are visible in the content and ordering of the Product Backlog. No one can force the Development Team to work from a different set of requirements.

Here, we list some common responsibilities of a PO in Agile:

- Single person responsible for maximising the return on investment.
- **Product vision.** The Product Owner has the responsibility of creating a vision so that the development team clearly see the expected outcome by the user. It is the Product Owner who majorly interacts and collaborates with the users to understand their requirements, thus, it is really important to translate this in a form of a vision to the team. Also, it is equally significant, to communicate to the stakeholders the vision and goals so that every talk the same language and have an identical understanding of the outcome. To make sure every item from the goal is aligned to the business objectives, the Product Owner should create a product road map, which is a high-level, tactical graphical summary that shapes the vision and direction for the product.

- Optimising the value of the work the Development Team performs.
- Ensuring that the Product Backlog is visible, transparent, and clear to all, and shows what the Scrum Team will work on next.
- **Managing the product backlog.** The most essential responsibility in a role a Product Owner is managing the product backlog. Today's market is really dynamic, every customer wants to stay at the top of the new features being introduced. Even the items in the product backlog might require some movements due to changing priorities. It's the Product Owners responsibility to build up a stack of items in the backlog and prioritise them as per the business goals and the global approach. The product backlog is a dynamic list of items and as we call it in agile, it is 'live document' that should be frequently updated based on changing project requirements all the way through development.
- Clearly expressing Product Backlog items
- **Prioritising needs.** Ordering the items in the Product Backlog to best achieve goals and missions. Constantly re-prioritises the Product Backlog. Making choices about the priority of product backlog items in order to deliver the maximum outcome. The Product Owner has to order the items in the Product Backlog to best achieve goals and missions. We live in a world where help is readily available in term of awesome tools, hence, there are heaps of tools to help Product Owners do this. The Product Owner is required to have the Backlog sequenced prior to the Sprint Planning Meeting. This means that each user story must be ordered by relative importance.
- Ensuring the Development Team understands items in the Product Backlog to the level needed.
- Clarifies questions on requirements.
- **Overseeing development stages.** Once we have the basic entities in place, vision, product backlog, and the prioritisation, the product owner has to make sure that he/she is participating in the overall development stages of the product. The team might need their Product Owner to get the clarity on a few queries or they might need to demo the committed item. The Product Owner will participate in the ceremonies with the team, in some ceremonies, this role can be active such as planning or backlog grooming but can be passive or inactive such as in the daily scrum.

- **Anticipating client needs.** In today's competitive environment, it is really important for someone in a role of a Product Owner, to understand the client/customer's needs. The product owner should understand the market, the competition, and the users' pain points. With those valuable pieces of information, the product owner can determine what features should be implemented, and in what order, with respect to time and importance. Sometimes the Product Owner can help the customers configuring and penning down the items which they want but are not able to comprehend. And here communication plays a big role.
- **Acting as primary liaison.** As we have talked about this at the start of our discussion, a product owner role is more into acting as a primary liaison between the teams and the customers. The person in this role has to make sure the information flow is quick and clear so that there is no interpretation or reading between the lines. The Product Owner has to make sure that the goal and the vision are correctly aligned with the work items on the product backlog. The Product Owner also acts as a liaison for business stakeholders and end-users, determining whether each story meets their shared expectations.
- **Evaluating product progress at each iteration.** The product owner makes sure that the development works upon the priorities and monitors the progress of the items over the course of a sprint. Work that is either not complete or un-done needs to be re-prioritised or sequenced. The Product Owner makes sure that the development delivers the expected outcomes from the stories they worked upon and accepts it.
- **Participates in the daily Scrums, Sprint Planning Meetings, and Sprint Reviews and Retrospectives.** Scrum ceremonies give a chance for the Product Owner to inspect and adapt. And as a result being present at these ceremonies is identical to success. It is important for the product owner to join the scrum meetings, it not only keeps the development team up-to-date with the priorities but also helps the product owner understand the perspective of the team if there are any impediments.
- **Terminates a Sprint if it is determined that a drastic change in direction is required.** If the Sprint goal has no meaning (will not deliver business value) because of the extreme change, the product owner can terminate the sprint. The termination is most frequently the outcome of an intense change in business priorities — something previously considered important is no longer important, or something even more significant is learned.

The Product Owner may do the above work, or have the Development Team do it. However, the Product Owner remains accountable.

The Product Owner sits in between of the senior management team, such as the CEO, CIO and CTO, and the Scrum Teams and is responsible for ensuring business requirements are met efficiently and effectively.

During each Sprint, the Scrum Team feedback to the Product Owner who can then decide whether to ship the product to the customers or to make further refinements before the product goes out.

By having a clear vision of the product, the Product Owner defines the Acceptance Criteria for each backlog item and is the best person to address any questions the Scrum team have about the backlog items.

The Product Owner should also engage in User Acceptance Testing as the product is being developed to get an early insight of the product so that any amendments are done early in the development rather than later.