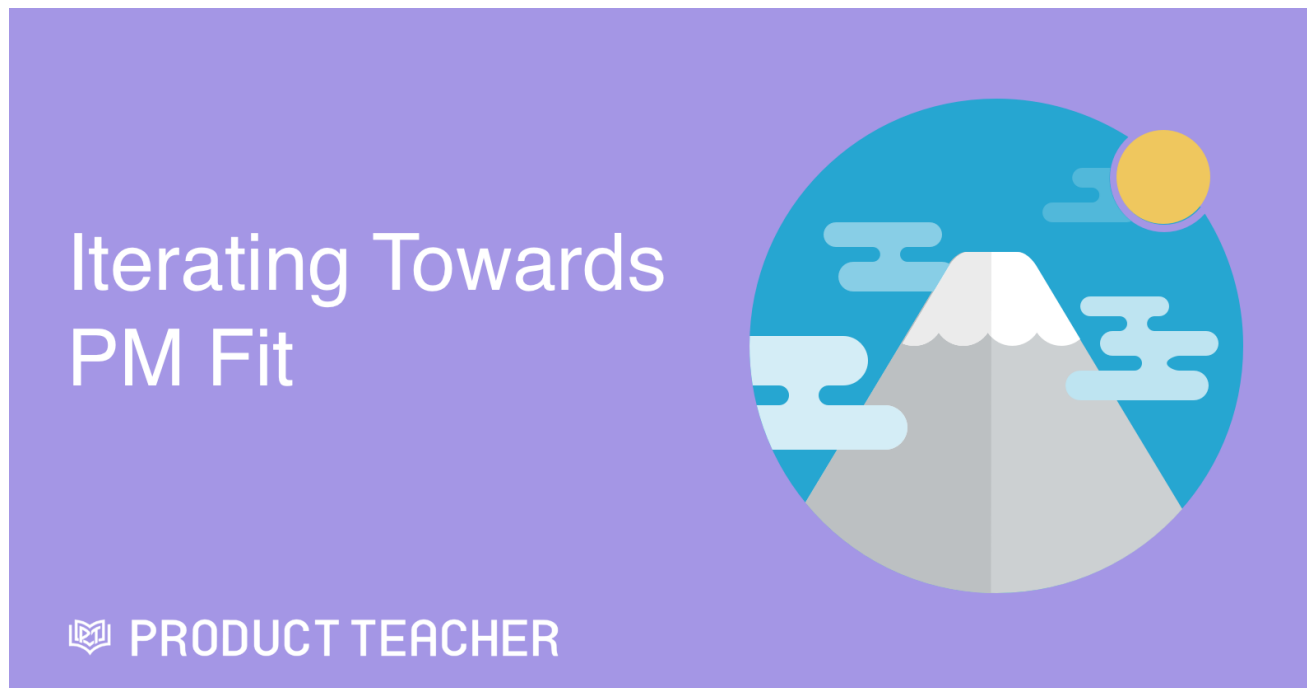


# Iterating Towards PM Fit

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As product managers, we're responsible for finding product/market fit for our products. Yet, many times, we forget to treat ourselves as products, and so we forget to find product/market fit for ourselves.

Problematically, many product managers feel a lack of fit when they first break into product management. That's not entirely unexpected - after all, there are countless types of product management roles out there!

Given how many different kinds of product managers there are, it's highly unlikely that your first-ever PM role is a perfect fit for the rest of your career. Rather, we should be curious about other kinds of product management, because we might find that we're a better fit for other kinds of product roles.

So, let's break down the product management landscape into independent axes so that we can reason more clearly about the different kinds of roles.

## Product Role Axes

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When most people think about product management, they think of a very specific flavor of product management - that is, most people think about PMs at publicly-traded consumer tech companies like Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Microsoft, and Google.

Just because this is the most visible kind of PM doesn't mean that it's the only kind of PM. To be clear, when we think of this "standard" PM, we have to keep in mind that this role has the following specific attributes:

- **B2C product** - focuses on consumer experiences, not on B2B enterprise customers or on company-internal platforms
- **Large company** - highly structured organization with clearly defined and highly specialized roles, which is significantly different from small startups
- **Scaling existing products** - aiming to move a metric upwards, rather than focused on launching a new vertical from "zero to one"

The thing is, there's a whole universe of product management roles out there! To help break down the landscape, consider the following four "axes", or independent attributes:

- Internal product vs. external product
  - Subaxis for internal products: operational efficiency vs. developer efficiency
  - Subaxis for external products: B2C vs. B2B
- Scaling existing products vs. launching new products
- Large companies vs. small companies
- User experience focus vs. technical focus
  - Subaxis for user experience focus: mobile vs. web
  - Subaxis for technical focus: data vs. platform

When we think about the standard consumer tech PM, they're specifically staffed on scaling external B2C UX products.

But, that's only one out of 64 combinations! For example, you could be tackling internal operational efficiency products at a small startup, where you're launching a totally new data product. That PM role is significantly different from a PM role where you're scaling B2B mobile apps at a large company, which itself is significantly different from a PM role where you're launching a B2C web ecommerce site at a small startup.

To be clear, I'm oversimplifying on purpose: I haven't broken down government products vs. nonprofit products, nor have I broken down products by geography. I haven't broken down technical product management into specific areas like AI, ML, IoT, crypto, identity, security, or integrations.

I also haven't broken down products by industry - after all, a healthtech product (e.g. Doximity) is very different from an ecommerce product (e.g. Grubhub), an insurtech product (e.g. Lemonade) is very different from a smart home product (e.g. Amazon Alexa), and a social media product (e.g. Instagram) is very different from a subscription product (e.g. Netflix).

As you can see, there are easily hundreds (if not thousands!) of kinds of product management roles out there.

That's why it's so important for us to discover what kind of product management we're most interested in, because we may have particularly valuable skill sets that don't fit into the "standard" scaling B2C product at a large company.

So, how do we decide what kinds of product management might fit us best? Let's talk about the two different modes of PM fit discovery.

## Two different modes for PM fit discovery

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Product managers are used to strategizing and planning for the future. So, it's no surprise that when product managers think about their career trajectories, they typically work in a **hypothesis-driven** fashion.

In other words, we put a stake in the ground and say "I would like to start moving towards XYZ kind of product, due to ABC evidence." Then, we run small experiments to prove or disprove this hypothesis.

While it's great to use the hypothesis-driven method for deciding what to do next, it's best to pair it with another method: the **experience-driven** approach.

When we reflect on the experiences that we've had so far, we'll find out more about what kinds of product management we like, and what kinds of product management we don't like.

This bottoms-up discovery is particularly valuable because we've already experienced it live. Many times, we'll learn surprising things about ourselves that we never even hypothesized in the first place.

Now that we know about the two different modes of PM fit discovery, how do we iterate towards PM fit?

## How to iterate towards PM fit

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To be clear, neither method of PM fit discovery should be used alone, and neither method is superior to the other. Think of it like retrospectives and roadmaps - you need both to succeed.

The hypothesis-driven approach helps you to look into the future, whereas the experience-driven approach enables you to extract learnings from the past.

You can't iterate towards fit if you only ever look backwards, and you also can't iterate towards fit if you never take the time to consider your current strengths and weaknesses.

First, start with reflecting on your previous experiences thus far. Identify what you're strong at, what you're weak at, what you enjoy, and what you don't enjoy.

Be sure to note the kinds of responsibilities, skill sets, and tasks that you both excel at and enjoy! These observations will form the basis for identifying what sort of north star role you should aim at.

Once you've pulled together your inventory of past experiences, select a hypothetical north star product role, using the 4 axes I mentioned earlier. What kind of product management might you be interested in tackling next? Be as specific as you can possibly be - in fact, if you can layer on additional attributes such as industry or geography, that's even better!

And, since it's a hypothesis, don't worry about perfection. As long as you have something to start working towards, you can always update your hypothesis later. After all, the typical career lasts multiple decades, so you have plenty of iteration runway ahead of you!

Once you've identified a hypothetical north star product role, conduct research on what that role entails. Read up on job descriptions, and talk to people who currently hold that position. The goal is to identify the gaps between where you are now and where you want to be.

Once you've identified the gaps, decide which gaps are the most impactful. Then, pull together a roadmap to chart your path towards gaining new capabilities.

You can gain these new capabilities by taking classes, finding mentors, or kicking off side projects. Another way to gain new capabilities is to raise your hand to your current manager and let them know which direction you want to go. Your manager is responsible for growing your talent and for retaining you at the company over the long run, so they should be invested in your growth trajectory.

Another key point to keep in mind - you're not a failure if your next role isn't the one that you were aiming for. Many times, your business will require you to pivot into a different kind of product management, and these learnings are still extraordinarily valuable.

As an example, I didn't realize that I enjoyed being a mobile app PM until I was moved into the role by my employer. Similarly, I didn't realize that I was strong at integrations until I was moved into an integrations PM role.

So, keep your mind open, and don't close yourself off to being moved into other types of product management based on your business's needs!

Any time you move from one PM type to another, hold off on trying to make any new hypotheses for the next 3-6 months. The first few months can be rocky, and you want to focus on mastering the responsibilities of the new role before making hypotheses based on insufficient data.

As an example, when I was moved into an integrations product management role, I paused on generating new hypotheses and focused on gaining experiences. After I had successfully shipped the integrations I was responsible for, I took the time to reflect and determine which aspects I enjoyed vs. which aspects I didn't enjoy. From there, I used these learnings to drive the next set of PM fit hypotheses for my career.

Once you've cleared the 6-month mark for any PM role, take 30 minutes to reflect on your experiences and log the following:

- What you enjoy
- What you don't enjoy
- Whether you'd like to stay at this role for another 3-6 months

Consistently repeat this process over time. By doing so, you'll iterate towards a product role that fits your particular skill sets and interests.

## **Closing Thoughts**

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Just because we started as a particular kind of PM doesn't mean that we're always going to be that kind of PM. The world is a better place when we work in roles that fit us - after all, our output will be much higher, and we'll be much more motivated to make a positive impact through our day-to-day jobs.

In a future article, I'll provide you with a questionnaire to help you better discover what kinds of product management you might be most interested in, so that you're more informed in selecting that north star product manager role.