



# Product Management needs T-shaped thinkers



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## LinkedIn predicted earlier this year that Product Management will be one of the top 15 emerging roles globally.

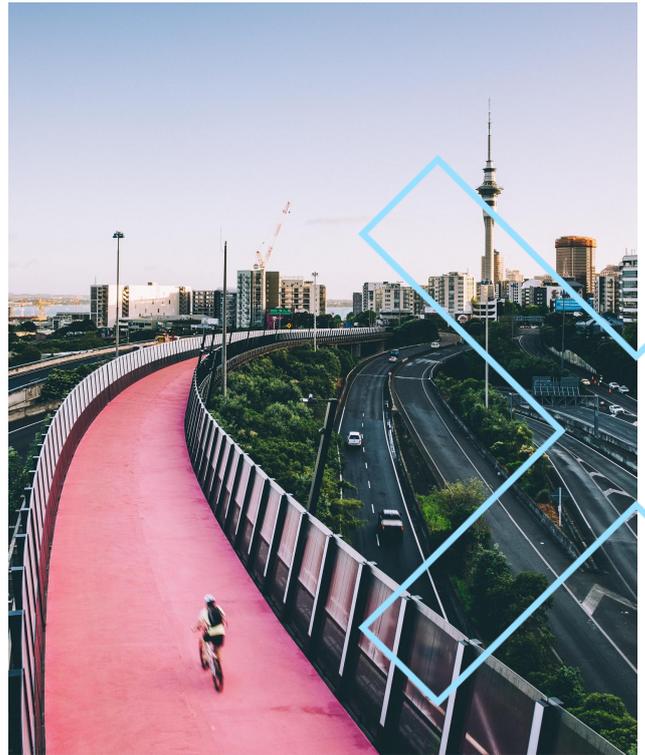
In New Zealand, even amidst an economic recession, a quick search on Seek returns over 1200 active roles to fill. This is a relatively new role and emerged in answer to the need for businesses to be customer-led and human focused. Now it's touted as the engine room for innovation and growth in business.

Arguably, all companies wanting to succeed in today's marketplace should be product-led. And product management is a fantastic and rewarding career path that offers the opportunity to create things that really can add value to people's lives.

The best product managers are 'generalising specialists' - think of this as a T-shape where your view is broad and you can understand and operate across many disciplines but still have in-depth knowledge and experience within one vertical business unit. Generalising specialists apply both analytical and creative thinking to achieve the right outcomes.

However, traditional legacy careers have meant many of us come from roles that have operated in silos of specialisation. So in addition to having a myopic view, we've also lost our innate ability as humans to interchange between creative and analytical thinking.

Yet this skill of applying both a left and right brain mentality throughout a product manager's day is imperative to achieving the best outcomes.



Product Management as we know it today has evolved from two main business units which traditionally sat distinct from one another - marketing and engineering.

Before the tech boom in the mid 1990's product development was primarily driven and coordinated by brand managers, a role first proposed in the 1930's by advertising manager Neil McElroy to the exec team at Procter & Gamble. At the time, this was a revolutionary concept that called for responsibility for the product rather than a business function - therefore it inherently required more emphasis on customer interaction and research.

Years later came the tech boom, which created a surge in software development led by engineers and technical developers.

Although this gave rise to state-of-the-art technology development, in many cases it lost sight of the end user, resulting in products that were technically amazing but not connected to users' needs.

Over the past 20 years, the role of product management has evolved organically from these early beginnings to have a consolidated view. Now it's a role that champions the customer experience by identifying their problems and solving their needs, yet with an approach that harnesses the brilliance of engineers and technical developers while still being cognisant of organisational goals.

Product management today an enticing balance of creative and analytical involvement - managing engineering requirements for what a designer may be inspired to create; thinking through the outcomes of customer testing to circle back and refine the design; measuring up the design concepts against the impact on the organisation's strategic goals.



This choreography between the analytical and creative mindsets across the business all comes together in a show of testing and experimentation, designed to demonstrate to business stakeholders the necessity and value of continued resources for the product development team.

But despite the growing demand for product-led development, there's no university degree or formal qualification to equip would-be product managers with the skills needed to be capable of interchanging between analytical and creative thinking while also being able to communicate effectively across several business units at once.



## Humans by nature are both creative and analytical.

We're solving problems everyday, based on the information we have; if the approach taken doesn't achieve what we expected, we review, critique and come at it again from a different angle. But in business, creative thinking does require some rigor and process, because in the end you need to come away with something actionable.

Learning the art of effective product management does require some formal training as well as perspective taking and insight learning from other product managers. But there are some things you can start doing right now that will help to develop your creative and analytical skills as a product manager.

### KNOW WHEN TO FLARE AND WHEN TO FOCUS

Sometimes, finding the right solution can be straight forward - we jump directly to it if we know it answers the problem. But for the more complex scenarios, ones not encountered before, the ability to flare and focus (also known as divergent and convergent thinking) builds a map of the design space that will help to provide solutions that are both creative and fit for purpose.

### APPLY ACTION-ORIENTATED DECISION MAKING

Developing ideas and thinking creatively can be one of the most fun parts of product management - but you need to know how to sort the 'wheat from the chaff' when it comes to taking those ideas forward.

Action-orientated decision making uses frameworks and methodologies to help pinpoint the right problem (design thinking principles), identify viable solutions to test (lean methodologies) and then supports testing and iterating to refine the chosen solution (agile frameworks).

## Being a generalising specialist is a skill learnt, not an inherent quality.

No doubt you're already a specialist in something. Developing your ability to think creatively and analytically will help you work with and relate to many different types of personalities. The next step is to learn the right tools and methods that will help you to understand and communicate with your stakeholders, recognise their expertise, their needs and their requirements so you can speak with them in a language they respond to.

Getting this buy in and coordination across different roles and specialisations will support your goal to deliver products that your customers really do love.

If you're interested in product management and want to get more quick tips on becoming an exceptional product manager, sign up for more from us.



Tech Futures Lab offers a short course Learning Sprint in Product Management. This 5 week intensive course teaches design and systems thinking practices, lean methodologies and agile frameworks to support product managers to start applying the skills learnt immediately and become fantastic at what they do.