

## A Turning Point In Your Career

*True or false:* Product management is an entry-level position.

False. But there's more to the story.

A comprehensive product manager's job is *not* an entry level position. Most have had prior experience in diverse areas. They may be new to product management, but not new to the work world.

Companies might start with an *assistant* product manager (or product marketing manager) as akin to entry-level. This enables the individual to move up to a full or senior position with experience. There may be significant room for career growth.

Product managers exist in virtually all industries, from consumer-packaged-goods (such as grocery and retail products) to industrial products (such as equipment and components) to services (such as health care and financial offerings). Some product managers emerge from specialized MBA programs (such as the Center for Brand and Product Management in the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison). Most transition to the role from engineering, nursing, computer programming and other disciplines. There are job similarities and differences for these product managers—and they can learn from each other.

In working with thousands of product managers, I have repeatedly heard common areas of inquiry. Here are a few of the typical questions I've heard.

- *What are the differences between business-to-business and business-to-consumer product managers?*
  - Business products are often more multiplex than consumer products. The knottier the product and purchase process, the more a product manager needs a related technical background, e.g., engineering. In addition, the go-to-market strategy may be different. Both should start with a knowledge of targeted customers.
- *Aren't all product managers product developers?*
  - Some companies separate product management into upstream activities focused on development, and downstream activities focused on marketing and lifecycle

management. Product managers practicably handle both. It depends on the company's expectations.

- *How many products does a "typical" product manager manage?*
  - There is no standard here. It can vary from one intricate product to hundreds — or even thousands — of related SKUs.
- *How do product managers work?*
  - The vast majority of product managers function in a matrix organization where they accomplish goals and execute strategies through others. This requires significant skill in communication and influence.
- *Where do product managers fit in the organization?*
  - Occasionally, product managers report to engineering, product development, or even product management. Many product managers still report to a marketing function.

Product management is multifaceted, often being referred to as the virtual CEO of a product line. That implies a need to embody a wide range of business skills and experience.