PRODUCT MANAGERS IN I.T. ORGANIZATIONS

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John W. McGuthry, Armstrong Atlantic State University

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INTRODUCTION

Depending on the organization, a product manager may have a variety of primary roles. In some organizations the main role of the product manager is to manage profit and loss. In some organizations, the main role is to manage the traditional marketing and communications efforts. For this document we will assume the main role of a product manager is to coordinate the activities surrounding the overall management of products and services. These duties include bringing new products and services to customers or end users, driving cost out of existing products and services, or repositioning existing products and services with upgrades and/or enhancements.

Product managers are almost a standard in companies that deliver products and services to external customers—in industries such as telecommunications or computer equipment manufacturers. But product managers are not as common in organizations that support internal customers or employees—such as traditional, internally focused IT organizations and, especially, higher education IT organizations. As those organizations move toward an IT service management model, the product management position and/or the functions performed by product managers may become more prevalent.

Many information technology organizations are organized into departments or functional units. These departments or functional units are generally organized by services delivered or by technology type. Regardless of how IT is organized, there will be a time when multiple departments or functional units are required to jointly deliver services to end users. On many of those occasions, there will not be an apparent owner for the service. Product managers could be the logical owner for those types of services.

PRODUCT MANAGEMENT DOCUMENT

Often product managers document requirements and features of a particular product or service with a document called a product description. A product description document is typically developed and maintained for the entire life of a particular product or service. That product description document typically contains a description of the standard features, a description of
the available options, and detailed explanations of the necessary and significant components and procedures required to successfully market, sell, operate, and support a particular product or service. This product description document is generally used as an internal company guide or organization guide for a particular product or service.

Information Technology organizations can take advantage of the benefits of product descriptions and its associated methodologies from product management. Organizations that sell complicated services use these documents to ensure that the entire organization understands what services they are delivering and most importantly understands exactly what the customer or end user receives. Those organizations that manage services through a formal product management document can better manage their services, customer expectations, and costs by deploying a consistent and standardized service.

**PRODUCT MANAGEMENT TEAM**

The product management team (i.e. product managers) is the core set of individuals that are responsible for managing the overall service, updating the service requirements, and ensuring the service is in proper balance with market requirements. Their core function is to document and negotiate all of the key components of the service in the product description, make changes and updates to that product description as the product changes, and communicate those changes to all of the key stake holders inside and outside of the organization. The product management team performs the following functions:

- Work with end users on requirements and key required functionality necessary for the service to be successful.
- Define the service direction based on industry trends and market needs.
- Identify with the architecture teams and other operational teams the technology standards and other operational components necessary to deliver the service.
- Work with key operational personnel on operational and support processes necessary to deliver the service.
- Work with key operational personnel on the appropriate support systems for customer support.
- Develop and define key customer support processes with operational support teams.
- Identify and work with financial teams on operational costs, revenue, and service penetration expectations.

**PRODUCT MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION**

Product managers in information technology organizations could focus their attention on the large enterprise applications and expansive technologies in traditional information technology
organizations. These large scale applications could generally have large impacts on the day to day operations of those organizations. These large implementations include telephone systems, email systems, ERP applications, CRM applications, and other related or similar services.

When IT organizations deliver services, especially to internal customers, there is a tendency to focus on delivering specific technologies rather than delivering services. For example, when organizations deliver an email solution to internal customers, they may refer to the email application name or the manufacturer or the specific technology used for that system. When service organizations deliver similar solutions, they most likely will focus on the service rather than the technology used to deliver the service. When information technology organizations focus on the following types of characteristics, they may be better suited to deliver services rather than technology:

- Features and options associated with the service.
- Service provisioning from the customer perspective and the operational perspective.
- The key operational procedures.
- The technical architecture required to deliver the service.
- The expected cost to deliver the service.
- The expected price of the service.
- The customer support model necessary to deliver the service.

Features and Options

The features and options of the service are rarely defined in the IT organization from the perspective of the end user. Often technologies are delivered without the required understanding of those features and functions. Before a solution is delivered, the following questions should be answered:

- What are the requirements of the end user and does this product meet that requirement?
- Is the entire product set that is available to the end user supported and fully understood by the IT organization?
- Should all of the features for a particular solution be made available to all end users and if not who should receive access to features and who should not and why?
- Is training available that describes all of the features and options?
- If all of those features are made available, is there proper documentation that describes how those features are used in an environment that is comfortable to the end user?
- Are there proper policies that guide the use of the service?

Before a solution is delivered to an end user, there should be a plan to fully describe how the product is to be used and what features and functions are available. This includes:
• Customer guidelines and policies statements.
• Target audience for the service and the expected use of the service.
• Guidelines and policies on special non-supported functions and how, if at all, they will be supported.
• Features that will be expected to be implemented in the future.
• The end user price associated with each feature or option (if a price exists with the service).

Service Provisioning

Many traditional information technology organizations in higher education do not have well defined processes for service provisioning. Often the methods used to acquire services are not user friendly. Typically there is very little documentation for the end user for setting expectations on their experience as well as documenting the operational metrics for service provisioning. Similarly when an error occurs in the provisioning process there is very little procedural support for managing those errors.

The service provisioning section of the product management document focuses on the process used by the end users to acquire the service. The acquisition of the service typically includes all of the processes and documentation necessary for the service to be activated as well as deactivated. This may include the following:

• Order forms.
• Customer interactions required for service activation and deactivation.
• Approvals required for service activation.
• Special circumstances and procedures for non-standard activations.
• Service metrics for activation (expected time intervals).
• Customer notifications and acknowledgments that the service has been activated and/or deactivated.
• Instructions and escalations for problems when service activation does not work as defined.

Operational Procedures

The operational procedures typically begin after proper or successful service activation. The operational procedures section of the document includes all of the operational activities required to keep the service operational. These operational procedures may include the following:

• Processes for customer interactions when unplanned changes to the service are identified.
• Processes for customer interactions for planned operational communications.
• Service level metrics.
• Downtime and other expected maintenance windows for system updates and system changes.
• Operational expectations and procedures for non-standard requests.
• Procedures for security related events.

Financial Characteristics

The financial characteristics required to deliver the service must also be defined. This defines all of the operational assumptions required for the service. These financial characteristics may include the following:

• Total expected penetration of the service for standard and optional components.
• Price for standard and optional features.
• Costs required to deliver services.
• Cost savings that are shared from similar services.

CONCLUSION

Many IT organizations that are internally focused, especially in higher education, may not have the budget or the resources to dedicate individuals to performing product management duties on a full-time basis. However, all IT organizations must deliver services to their internal customers, and many are increasingly being asked to deliver services to external customers. Similarly, many of the services being delivered by these organizations are increasingly becoming more mission-critical and thus more important to the entire institution. By using product managers to help implement IT service management models for key technologies and services, IT organizations will be better prepared to manage customers’ expectations as well as to manage the operations of the services delivered.

REFERENCES