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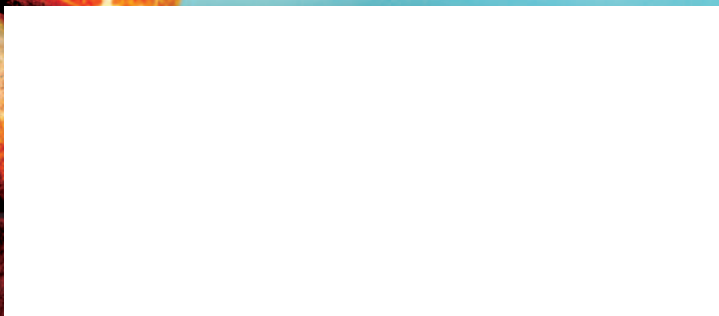
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Product Owners Should Care About Quality

Software quality influences a product's success, and the product owner is responsible for that success.

by Roman Pichler | roman.pichler@romanpichler.com

Product owners are responsible for product success. As a member of the Scrum team, the product owner collaborates with the ScrumMaster and team, as well as customers, users, and other stakeholders, to create a great product. Unfortunately, product owners often focus on delivering functionality and tend to neglect quality—rather than viewing quality as an enabler to deliver new features faster and to create lasting value.

Why Should Quality Matter to Product Owners?

Software quality significantly impacts product success: It influences customer satisfaction and brand equity, impacts the total cost of ownership and life expectancy of the product, and determines the product's competitiveness. Therefore, quality matters; it plays a key role in creating great products, as I explain in more detail below.

Customers will only be satisfied if the product's functionality works reliably and as expected. Defective software not only leaves customers dissatisfied, frustrated, or angry, but it also damages brand equity. Think about the issues Microsoft experienced with Windows Vista, including performance and interoperability problems. As a consequence, the company discontinued the Vista brand, calling its next operating system Windows 7. Only when quality meets functionality is true value created.

Quickly releasing poor-quality software may achieve a short-term win, but it incurs technical debt—the software becomes difficult to extend and maintain. [1] This results in high development cost and long lead time for new functionality. Software with inadequate quality often has to be replaced sooner rather than later, resulting in a short life expectancy and a poor return on investment.

Getting quality right is the prerequisite to leveraging customer feedback on early product increments, swiftly releasing software in response to the latest market development, and quickly bringing new functionality to the market. Compromising software quality means trading short-term gains for

longer-term growth, cheating the company of a better, brighter future.

What Can Product Owners Do to Ensure Quality?

As quality impacts product success, it should be a concern for the product owner as the individual who is first and foremost responsible for product success. To help get the quality right, product owners should apply the following recommendations:

Think products, not projects. A product owner should be responsible for a product for an extended period of time and ultimately manage the product life-cycle. Embracing a product perspective means viewing a project as a means to an end—the project simply brings the next product version to life. Longer-term responsibility counteracts the temptation to compromise quality in order to finish the current project fast and get the next release out as soon as possible. “Thinking products, not projects” creates a desire for sustained success and encourages long-term thinking.

Create a common understanding of quality. Make sure that a definition of “done” is available for each product

and apply that definition properly. The definition should clearly state the general quality criteria that product increments must fulfill. “Done” usually requires that a (potentially) shippable product—executable software that has been tested and documented and could be released—is available at the end of each sprint. As a consequence, quality assurance and control measures form an integral part of the development work instead of being carried out at the end of the project as an afterthought. Be specific regarding what “tested” and “documented” mean for your product. Some teams with which I have worked used metrics to refine and measure the quality criteria. As the product owner, you have to apply the done criteria to accept or reject work results when reviewing items—only work results that fulfill all the done criteria can be accepted. Enforcing the definition of done makes the product owner the guardian of quality.

“Compromising software quality means trading short-term gains for longer-term growth, cheating the company of a better, brighter future.”


Minimize defects and unnecessary rework. Together with the team, regularly groom the product backlog, and be available to answer questions as they arise. Due to its dynamic nature, the product backlog needs continued attention and care. New items emerge; existing ones are adjusted or removed. Items must be prioritized and estimated, and the high-priority items have to be detailed for the next sprint planning meeting. For example, user stories that are likely to be implemented in the next sprint should now be small enough and have well-formed acceptance criteria. Jointly grooming the product backlog ensures that it contains the right items in the right order, and it increases the likelihood that a story's implementation will meet the product owner's expectation. When it comes to product owner availability, I often suggest the one-hour rule: Product owners should spend on average at least one hour per day with their teams. This ensures that the product owner is available to quickly answer questions and provide early feedback on work results.

Invest in quality. Accept that team members need time to create high-quality software. Regard agile development practices such as test-driven development and continuous integration as essential to ensure sustained product health. Allowing team members time to refactor the software or to experiment

with new practices and tools may result in a lower velocity in the short term, but it speeds up development in the mid to long term.

Summary

Quality should be a concern for everyone on the Scrum team—the product owner, the ScrumMaster, and the team members. Since quality influences product success, it is in the product owner's best interest to care about quality and to collaborate with the team to ensure that a product with the right quality is created. Neglecting quality may achieve short-term gains, but it wastes longer-term growth and a better, brighter future. **{end}**



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