

DESIGNING SUCCESSFUL PRODUCT TEAMS

Team design—how a team is set up—significantly impacts its ability to succeed. If a product team is not designed properly, it will struggle to do a great job. Answering the questions below will help you set up product teams for success.

PURPOSE, GOALS, AND EMPOWERMENT

1. What is the team's purpose? What is the positive change it should bring about?
2. What are the specific goals towards which the team will be working? What will guide and constrain its decisions? For example, the business strategy, product portfolio strategy, or product strategy.
3. What are the team's responsibilities? What level of ownership and empowerment does it require? Does the team have full-stack ownership (including product strategy, discovery, and delivery) or partial ownership (limited to product discovery and delivery)?

ROLES, SKILLS, AND INDIVIDUALS

4. Which roles and skills does the team require to succeed? Which task expertise and which social skills are needed? The former might include business stakeholders like a marketer, sales rep, and customer support team member, in addition to the person in charge of the product, a UX designer, architect/programmer, and tester, as well as a team coach.
5. How much availability do the team members require? How long are they expected to stay on the team? I find it beneficial to form stable product teams whose members stay together for an extended period, preferably for several product lifecycle stages.
6. Who are the individuals best suited to fill the roles and work on the team?
7. Will the designated team members be able to work together? Can you anticipate teamwork difficulties? Have some of the individuals experienced unhealthy conflict, for instance?
8. Will the team be sufficiently small but appropriately diverse/cross-functional? Product teams should be big and diverse enough to make effective decisions. At the same time, they should not have more than ten members to facilitate low communication costs and fast decision-making.
9. Will the team members have to acquire new knowledge or skills to play a successful role on the team? Which learning and development measures are helpful? Are they available as needed?
10. Will one of the team members be empowered to decide if no agreement can be reached? I recommend that the person in charge of the product is given this authority.

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ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT

11. Who is the (executive) sponsor and escalation partner of the product team? The answer will depend on the importance of the product and the size and structure of the company. In the case of a strategically important product, the team might report to the CEO, for example.
12. Do the line managers support the membership of their staff? Will the team members be empowered to make decisions on behalf of their departments and groups? What needs to be done to secure the necessary support?
13. What level of autonomy does the product team require? For instance, will the team be able to independently progress and release their product? Should the team be loosely coupled to the rest of the organisation and be set up as an incubator? Will the team be able to choose the processes and tools they find most helpful, or will they be bound by the organisation's standards?
14. Who will coach the product team? Will it be a senior manager like the head of product, an (external) product coach, a ScrumMaster/agile coach, or the person in charge of the product?

FACILITIES AND TOOLS

15. Where will the members meet? Does the team require a team room? And if that's the case, where will it be located?
16. Which tools, incl. hardware and software, are necessary to help people do their job and work together effectively? Are the tools readily available or do they need to be procured and installed?

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