



Building excellent products in the age of remote work



A productboard publication
in partnership with [Hiten Shah](#)

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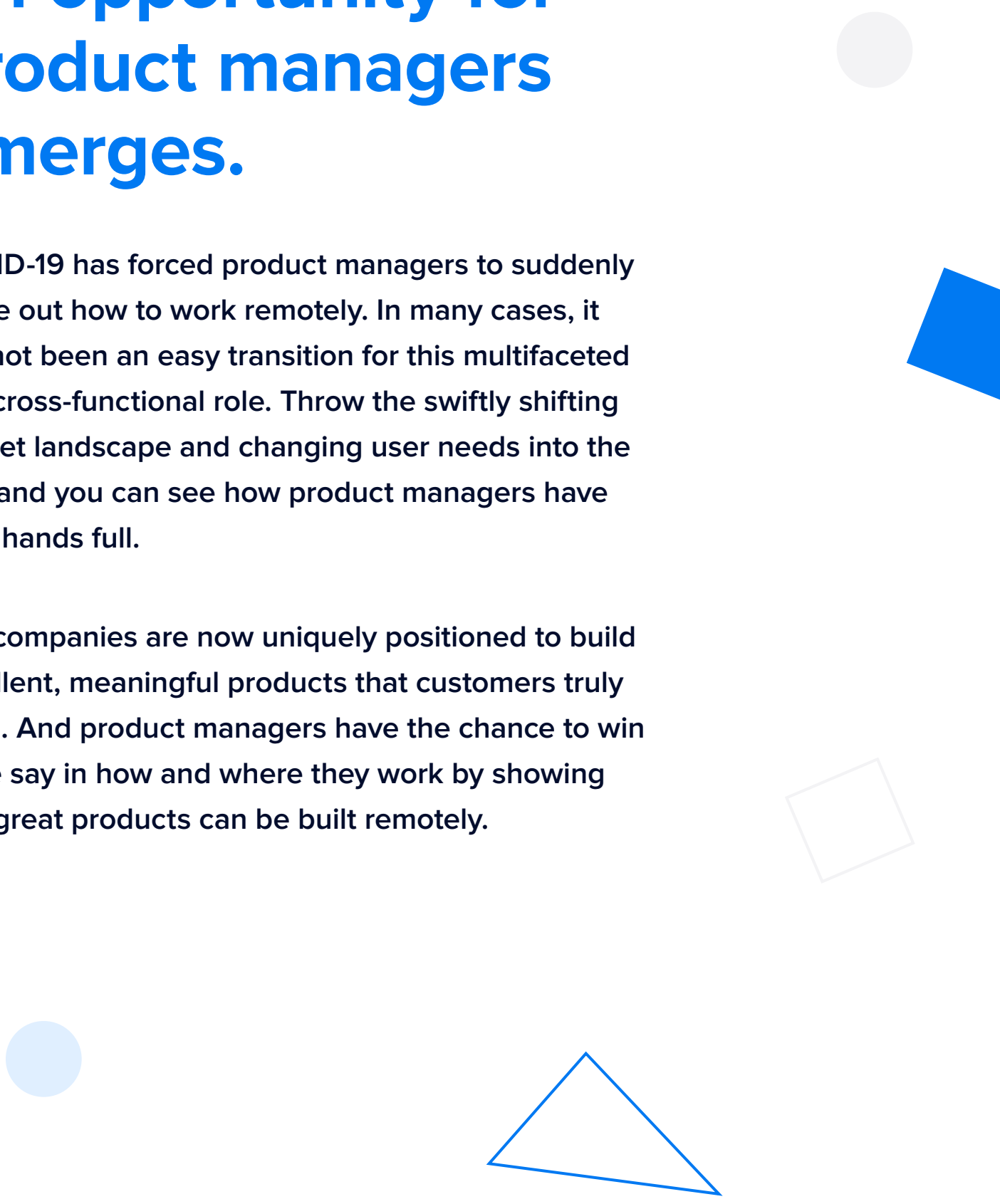
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An opportunity for product managers emerges.



COVID-19 has forced product managers to suddenly figure out how to work remotely. In many cases, it has not been an easy transition for this multifaceted and cross-functional role. Throw the swiftly shifting market landscape and changing user needs into the mix, and you can see how product managers have their hands full.

Yet, companies are now uniquely positioned to build excellent, meaningful products that customers truly need. And product managers have the chance to win more say in how and where they work by showing that great products can be built remotely.

Companies are now uniquely positioned to build excellent, meaningful products that customers truly need.

To properly seize these opportunities, product managers must let go of the sales- and engineering-led approaches of yesterday and embrace a customer-driven strategy.

They also need to build a strong foundation of processes that can help overcome the key challenges of remote product management during a downturn—**retaining existing customers, adapting your product strategy, and keeping your team aligned and collaborating effectively.**



In this guide to building excellent products in the age of remote work, we detail each pain point and outline solutions. We then address FAQs from the product management community about their experience working remotely.

To provide you with industry-leading expertise, we've enlisted the help of **Hiten Shah, remote-work expert and founder and CEO of document tool FYI.**

Just last year, he released [The Remote Work Report](#), which is based on a survey of hundreds of remote working professionals.

Without further ado, let's dig in.

CHAPTER ONE

What product teams can do to retain customers in times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic, like any crisis, makes the importance of retaining existing customers immediately clear. **As customers scrutinize business expenses and “trim the fat,” their risk of churn increases, making it more important than ever to deliver more product value in less time.** But past approaches to product development create blindspots, particularly at sales-led and engineering-led organizations.

Sales-led product approach:

Focuses on meeting feature requests over deep understanding of user needs. Prioritizes shipping features that will close major deals, regardless of whether it supports a broader strategy.

Engineering-led product approach:

Puts technology ahead of users' needs. Focuses on delivering features efficiently over ensuring the right features are being built, or that certain outcomes—for users or for the business—are being achieved. Trades short-term advances for long-term product strategy.

By being *customer-driven and product-led*, you uncover users' needs every step of the way and use them to guide your efforts. You prioritize based on the needs of your target customers while working with your team to define the optimal solution for those needs, perhaps something they never even thought to ask for. And you ensure that your work aligns with a broader strategy that will help you achieve your long-term vision. Here's how to do it.

Close the divide between your customers and product team

To practice Product Excellence, you must continuously capture customer feedback, show users where you're headed and why, and make data-driven decisions that get buy-in from customers and internal stakeholders.

Set up feedback pipelines

The goal of establishing feedback pipelines is to continuously collect product ideas, requests, and feedback from customers. These may arrive directly from customers, or they may be relayed from colleagues on sales, support, and customer success. And the insights we distill from these inputs help inform where we take our products next.

With the right product management system and integrations, you can create a [repository of user insights](#) by capturing feedback from the following:

- Support platforms, such as Zendesk
- Internal communication platforms, such as Slack or Microsoft Teams
- Customer conversation and messaging tools, such as Intercom, email, and social media
- NPS tools like Gainsight, Wootric, and SatisMeter
- CRM software, such as Salesforce

These direct streams help you get a consolidated view of feedback coming in from all angles—*much* better than having it scattered across different tools. They're even more important if you lack regular interactions with members of customer-facing teams who might otherwise provide some of this context in person.

By being customer-driven and product-led, you uncover users' needs every step of the way and use them to guide your efforts.

Product Excellence is about listening to customers, synthesizing what you're hearing from them, and then making strategic product decisions that align with your business.

Synthesize feedback and unearth deep user insights

Product Excellence isn't just about doing whatever your customers ask. It's about listening to customers, synthesizing what you're hearing from them, and then making strategic product decisions that align with your business.

There are a few reasons why you can't rely on surface insights. First, customers are great at telling you their pain points—what's broken and what needs fixing. But they're generally not great at envisioning the ideal solution that works for everyone. Second, customers' priorities are not always aligned with your business's priorities. Finally, customer feedback tends to focus on the here and now, while product teams should rely on a strong vision and a strategy for where they want to take the product in the future.

Instead, think of feedback as invitations from your customers to dig deeper. You'll be in a much better position to explore and get to the bottom of their underlying needs.

Get smart about segmenting users

With so many constraints these days, it can feel overwhelming to be pulled in so many different directions. It's liberating to realize that not all user requests need to be considered equally. Of course, it would be wonderful if you could solve everyone's problems. But in the real world, attempting to please everyone means you'll please no one.

Only mediocre products arise from building for the “average user”—a fictional figure who is attributed needs that really span several different types of real-world users.

When it comes to smartly segmenting customers, data is critical. As business slows due to the latest crisis, have patterns emerged? Where do the needs of different segments overlap? Diverge? How will you prioritize the needs of different segments, given limited time and resources? Which customer segment is your target, and which segments will you deprioritize for now?

Get customers excited about where your product is headed

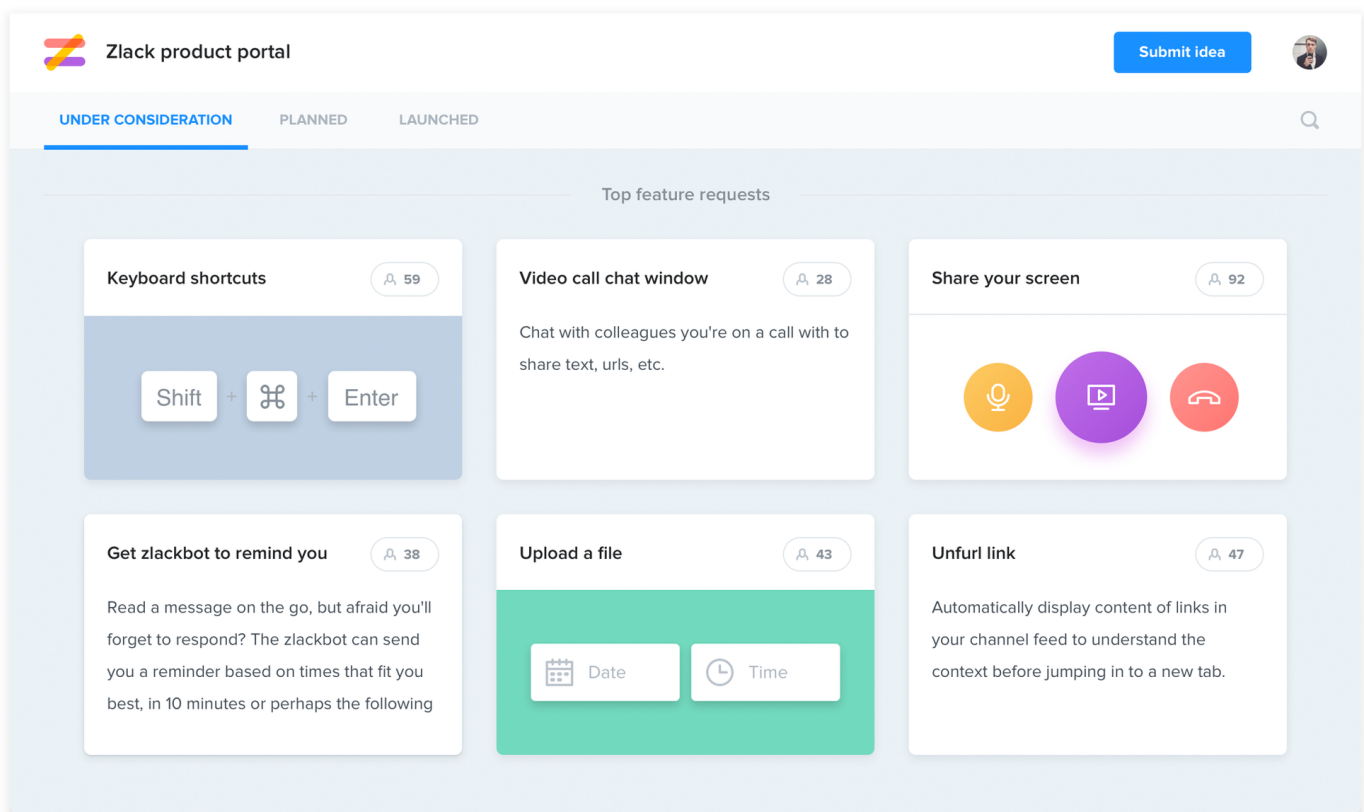
A great way to keep customers from churning? Get them excited about the big picture. **Show customers the direction you're heading in with your product and get input directly from them.**

productboard's Portal, for example, provides an interface where your users can make feature requests as well as vote and provide feedback on their favorite feature ideas.

Early, interactive communication is key.

Reinforce the message that customers are part of the discovery process. Invite them to beta testing of new features. Let them know when their suggestions have been heard.

The more you involve customers directly, the more connected they feel with your product, and the more likely it is that they will stick around for the long haul. If there's a feature coming that they're excited about, they won't dare miss out. Not only that, but this direct connection between customer feedback and the product roadmap makes it easier to prioritize what to build next and get it right the first time.



The productboard Portal

Close the loop: Show your customers they've been heard

No one wants to feel like they're taking the time to submit thoughtful feedback without getting anything in return. Close the loop, and demonstrate to customers just how valuable their inputs are. There are several ways to do this:

- **Validate your feature ideas directly with customers.** Follow up with the customers who've requested a feature in the past, conduct research on their needs, and run solution ideas by them. Already built the feature? Invite them to a private beta so they can be the first to provide feedback.
- **Once a new feature is officially launched, contact all the customers who requested it to celebrate the good news.**

Customers will appreciate that you remembered they asked for this capability and will be thrilled to get started with it.

With the right product management system, you can automate much of this process—from identifying which users requested which features to sending updates to all of them when a feature is being researched, delivered, or launched. So, ultimately, the effort is a small one.

But it really does show customers you're listening, and it's a reminder that you're continuously making your product more valuable for them. Not only will they want to stick around, they'll become advocates who will rave about your product to others.

Product Excellence at work: FYI's obsession with customers

In Hiten's experience, the surest way to Product Excellence lies in obsessing over your customers.

"From the beginning, we've been obsessed with the journey our customers take with us," he says. "Our laser-focus on customers, their feedback, and behavior helps us make better-informed product decisions at every touchpoint."

In fact, this obsession with customers helped FYI recognize the opportunity to be a thought leader in remote work and product management.

By creating a tool that can find any document in three clicks or less, FYI helps remote and distributed teams quickly find any information they need across the entire company.

CHAPTER TWO

Define and stick to a product strategy suited for the remote era

Even before COVID-19, the writing was on the wall for product managers. The accelerated pace of technology markets, the new industries being disrupted by digital transformation, and rising customer expectations all screamed one thing: ship better products, faster.

With COVID-19, product managers are experiencing even more pressure to get the right products to market—with fewer costly iterations.

As the likelihood of churn increases and sales pipelines narrow or get pushed out, there is no longer room for error.

For many companies, this means reforecasting their roadmap to mitigate risk, reduce costs, and make bets on new areas of growth for their product. Obviously, this is easier said than done. You first need to have a strong, foundational product strategy in place to inform prioritization decisions and grab hold of new opportunities.

The accelerated pace of technology markets, the new industries being disrupted by digital transformation, and rising customer expectations all screamed one thing: ship better products, faster.

Standardize your prioritization criteria and frameworks

In times of crisis, it is easy—and even reassuring—to default to being reactive. After all, change is happening quickly, and it can temporarily ease pressure and stress.

However, this provides a quick fix rather than meaningful, long-term progress. Instead, product managers need to build an objective-driven product strategy that standardizes prioritization criteria and frameworks:

- Your product strategy represents a plan for how to best arrive at your mid- to long-term product vision, accounting for opportunities and constraints your organization is facing.
- Product strategies can be broken down into clear, measurable objectives that you can pursue in the short run to advance you in the right direction:
 - Some product objectives relate to user needs and how you can create more value for customers. This requires a holistic view of what your users really need.
 - Other product objectives represent needs of your business and how you'll overcome constraints, adapt to market conditions, or defeat the competition.

With a clear strategy in place, your product management process will be more resilient to a crisis, and you will be able to assess and reprioritize items on your roadmap strategically rather than reactively.

Stay on top of changes in product usage

On the product side, it is important to stay on top of changes in user behavior. After all, user needs can change dramatically during a crisis, impacting the products and features to prioritize moving forward.

For example, if your product is expense-reporting software, you will likely see a large shift away from expenses related to business travel as long as COVID-19 restrictions remain in place.

Instead, people are submitting expenses related to the setup of home offices. The products and features you decide to build next should address this.

With a clear product strategy in place, your product management process will be more resilient to a crisis, and you will be able to assess and reprioritize your roadmap strategically rather than reactively.

Analyze macro trends to anticipate new areas of growth

Anticipating new areas of growth following a crisis is a key way for businesses to come out ahead. But how to know *where*? Paying attention to macro trends and their potential to affect your industry can provide some answers.

These changes have major implications no matter what industry you're in, and companies need to take them into account when rethinking product strategy and planning for the future.

Macro trends related to COVID-19

Below are several realities we are facing during the crisis, along with associated trends.

Can't physically go to the store

- Ecommerce
- Drone delivery
- Online preorder and curbside pickup

Reduce risk in checkout lines

- Digital contactless payments

Can't go to work or see friends

- Video conferencing
- Increasing importance of desktop vs. mobile

Health care in high-demand

- Wearable health monitors
- Remote doctors' appointments

Disrupted supply chains

- 3D printing, manufacturing, and fabrication
- Smart robotics

Can't go to school, work, or conferences

- Online learning
- Digital conferences and meetups

CHAPTER THREE

Optimizing remote product management workflows and collaboration

Product managers occupy a multifaceted role. Each day, their tasks require cross-functional collaboration, a variety of tools to increase efficiency, and lots and lots of communication—all of which are more difficult in a remote work environment.

With so many concurrent workflows and a wealth of information at stake, here are some ways product managers can optimize their processes and productivity levels remotely.

Adapt your product management process to a remote work environment using the VACA method

Recognizing the challenge of keeping everyone on the same page (even when they're in different time zones), Hiten came up with what he calls the VACA method. The method assesses any product management process using four different criteria: visibility, accountability, communication, and alignment.

V isibility

Can everyone see what's happening throughout the product development process?

A ccountability

Are people being held accountable for the work they're responsible for?

C ommunication

How well are you communicating as a team? Does everyone feel in the know?

A lignment

Are visibility, accountability, and communication all strong? How can the team improve?

To use the VACA method, grade each criteria on a scale of zero through five to figure out areas to improve, and go from there.

Turn tribal knowledge into shared product knowledge

A product management system like productboard helps you excel in all areas of the VACA method out of the box and takes it one step further.

In times of uncertainty, people sometimes get sick, take extended leave, or have to leave the company. Often, a lot of insight about the product leaves with them.

That's why it is imperative to consolidate the most important ideas and feedback about your product into one central repository. And this information needs to be accessible to everyone in the business.

With this system in place, you seamlessly maintain business continuity and reduce the risk of brain drain and having to start from square one.

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Hiten Shah answers frequently asked questions about remote product management



About Hiten Shah

Hiten Shah has been working remotely for 17 years and is co-founder and CEO of FYI, a product that helps you find your documents in three clicks or less across time zones, teams, and tools.

He previously started Crazy Egg and KISSmetrics. He's also an investor in and adviser to over 120 companies.

Skills needed to excel in a remote environment



What skills do product managers need to excel in a remote work environment?

Product managers must level up their soft skills in a big way. You should focus on asking good questions, listening, and empathizing with coworkers. **Asking good questions and putting yourself in the shoes of coworkers can help create a shared understanding of the work that is happening.**

Working remotely means shifting from verbal to written communication—something most of us aren't used to.

The absence of tone and visual cues can be challenging. Train yourself, and inspire your team not to take things personally.

Don't be afraid to ask for clarity if something comes off as off-putting or confusing. The more questions you ask, the more your team will follow your lead and ask their own. This creates an environment where people feel open to express themselves and ensures that everyone is on the same page.



How can product managers show influence and leadership while working remotely?

To be influential in a remote environment, involve relevant stakeholders early in major initiatives.

When it comes to planning a product roadmap, for example, stakeholders should be looped in from the get-go to share their opinions. This helps earn buy-in early for major product decisions and ensures that significant resources, time, and work don't go to waste because someone important wasn't able to chime in before work got started.

Turn “share before you're ready” into a mantra. When you involve people early, you show vulnerability and openness.

Product managers influence everything but control nothing.



How can individual contributors showcase their value when working remotely, without feeling like they're bragging or giving a daily status?

To showcase your value, communicate with intention, and be fearless in taking ownership.

Remote work requires intentional overcommunication. The team needs to know what you have accomplished, and when.

To showcase your value, communicate with intention, and be fearless in taking ownership.

As for taking ownership, every initiative needs an owner or it won't get done. Don't be afraid to step up and be the person to do it—the team will notice.

As Ken Sandy, former product lead at MasterClass and Lynda.com puts it, **"A great product manager sees every part of the product's success as their responsibility. They collaborate with every part of the organization to realize that success. . . ."**

They don't say, 'that's not part of my job.' If something needs doing, they roll their sleeves up and get it done."

Communication and relationship-building



How can product managers build and maintain relationships with their entire organization remotely?

To build and maintain relationships with the entire organization, overcommunicate, and write it down.

Share more, talk more, then write it in the best medium for whoever needs to know.

Effective remote communication channels

Daily Slack updates

Get visibility across the whole organization, and stay up to date on what everyone is working on.

Shared to-do lists

Effective for collaborating with another individual or within small groups.

Postmortems

Useful for asynchronous workflows, varying time zones, and “business as unusual” interruptions.

Product management system

Acts as a source of truth for all product management processes.

Preset meeting agendas

Increases productivity by making the purpose of each meeting and next steps obvious.

Company news document

Helps teams learn from past wins and failures to increase efficiency in the future.



How do you recreate “watercooler” conversations at the office?

Unfortunately, you can’t recreate everything from the office when working in a distributed way, and that’s OK. But the Now & Later method is one way to think about reaching out to colleagues.

The key to the Now & Later method is identifying what is a priority and what can be put off for later. If you have something that’s relevant to a team member now, find a way to get to them within the next few hours using the right medium.

Watercooler conversations are normally a “later” thing, so a slower communication method, such as email, where people can answer in their own time, is better.

A shared to-do list can also help identify collaborative items and put a date on them.



The key to the Now & Later method is identifying what is a priority and what can be put off for later.

Product leadership



How can product leaders keep their teams engaged, happy, and feeling psychologically safe when dealing with large pivots in product strategy, especially when working remotely?

This is not remote work as usual. Everyone is forced to be at home 100% of the time, and those who have worked remotely for years are facing new challenges.

The kids are home, for example, more meals have to be cooked, and the dog needs to be walked.



To help with this transition, Hiten developed the [PEACE framework](#):

Provide time and space to deal with home life.

Ease into meetings with banter.

Accept interruptions.

Create time just to talk.

Enable flexibility.

Here, it's important to circle back to the importance of not taking things personally, not just for yourself but also for your teammates. Reach out when something feels off. Let people know it's OK not to be OK.



Are companies seeing any impact on productivity with this massive shift to remote work?

The simple answer is yes.

A lot of companies didn't have remote work expectations in place when the pandemic hit. How quickly should messages be responded to? What's proper meeting etiquette for employees with kids at home?

Then there's the infrastructural side. Zoom grew 20x in a single quarter. NordVPN usage is up 165% globally since mid-March. People have to balance learning these new cloud tools with managing their households. Both AT&T and Verizon have seen traffic spike more than 20% on its fiber broadband and wireless services.

The reality is, productive remote teams build social time into their workflows. Patience and humanity are our best tools for getting back our productivity.

Communicate clear expectations, trust employees to do the work, and resist the urge to schedule extra meetings. The more meetings, the less work done.

Patience and humanity are our best tools for getting back our productivity.



Improving remote workflows & productivity



How can product teams better collaborate remotely?

Hiten adheres to the following process:

- **Choose a tool to collaborate in.** It can be something like productboard for your product management processes, Miro for whiteboarding, etc.
- **Get on a voice call.**
- **Make video optional** to limit distraction and have one person share their screen.
- **Talk and work together.** When product teams want to get something done together—whether it's writing copy, reviewing specs, or analyzing customer feedback—open up a tool like productboard or another system of record and go through things together. Share more, talk more, then write it in the best medium for whoever needs to know.



What are some different types of tools that product managers can leverage in a remote work environment?

Hiten's tool recommendations for product managers

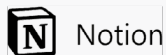
General purpose tools:



- Documents
- Sharing



- Whiteboarding



- Workspace
- Company wiki



- Messaging
- Collaboration

Specific-purpose tools



- User research



- Customer surveys



- Development
- Code



- Product management
- Insights, roadmaps



What are some strategies to keep teams engaged remotely?

When Hiten ran the [remote work survey at FYI](#), these were the top three challenges that came back:

- **Communication**
- **Lack of social opportunities**
- **Loneliness and isolation**

So, to address these concerns and engage the team remotely, make time for socializing at the beginning and end of meetings.

Ideally, it should become part of the agenda, and you can get creative to keep the conversation fresh. Jeff Whitlock, founder and CEO at Unbird, uses techniques like Rose, Thorn, Bud.

People also appreciate small things, such as a Slack channel dedicated to life outside of work. And there's no reason you can't schedule meetings just for socializing.



How do you keep yourself productive when working remotely?

Make yourself visible at work. Share meeting notes, respond to edits, update your Slack status, etc. These efforts show the team that you're staying active and help you hold yourself accountable.

Host postmortems after big projects. Nothing gets improved unless it's reviewed. Are you going to repeat a past process? How do you know it worked? Did you achieve the outcome you wanted? This is important information that can keep projects streamlined and efficient.

Check out Hiten's blog post "[11 Best Practices for Working Remotely](#)" for more great takeaways.



The current crisis



How can product leaders position themselves for growth in the face of a crisis?

In a piece from [Bain & Company](#) about how businesses can better prepare themselves for a crisis, an economic downturn is compared to a sharp curve on an auto racetrack. According to the article, “the best drivers apply the brakes just ahead of the curve, turn hard toward the apex of the curve, and accelerate hard out of the curve.”

When you apply this analogy to product management, **reforecasting product strategy** is when you apply your brakes ahead of the curve. As you look ahead, you have to **analyze and make a bet as to where growth is going to come and how that relates to your product or service**—that’s turning toward the apex of the curve.

You can then **make the necessary changes** in order to execute on your new strategy and accelerate out of the curve.

When it comes to reforecasting, it is prudent to map out best-case, mid-case, and worst-case scenarios of how a crisis might affect your business. On the product side, pay special attention to how people are using your product and how it is changing.

On top of that, paying attention to macro trends and their potential to affect your industry can provide some answers on where growth will come from. Assessing these various data points can paint a comprehensive picture on what to do and where to invest efforts next.



The onset of the COVID-19 crisis has obviously been challenging for product managers (and everyone, really). Is there any light at the end of the tunnel to look forward to?

There’s no doubt COVID-19 has ushered in a period of uncertainty that is difficult for not just product managers but for businesses in general. However, product managers are uniquely positioned to help their companies accelerate out of the curve of the crisis and into a new period of growth.

The companies that have survived previous recessions tend to have one thing in common: great products or services that people truly need. That’s why we conclude with some optimism. The light at the end of the tunnel might seem far, but hyperfocusing on your customers will equip you with a fighting chance.

Thank you for reading.



About productboard

productboard is a customer-driven product management system that empowers teams to get the right products to market, faster. It provides a complete solution for product teams to understand user needs, prioritize what to build next, align everyone on the roadmap, and engage with their customers. productboard is easy to use, enables company-wide collaboration, and integrates into existing workflows.

Learn more at productboard.com

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