Responsibilities and Challenges of Product Owners in Practice

Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir

Thesis of 12 ECTS credits
Master of Project Management (MPM)

May 2014
Responsibilities and Challenges of Product Owners in Practice

Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir

Thesis of 12 ECTS credits submitted to the School of Science and Engineering at Reykjavik University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Project Management (MPM)

May 2014

Supervisor:
Dr. Marta Kristín Lárusdóttir
Lektor, Reykjavík University, Iceland
Responsibilities and Challenges of Product Owners in Practice

Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir

12 ECTS thesis submitted to the School of Science and Engineering at Reykjavik University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Project Management (MPM).

May 2014

Student:
____________________________________
Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir

Supervisor:
____________________________________
Dr. Marta Kristín Lárusdóttir

Examiner:
____________________________________
RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES OF PRODUCT OWNERS IN PRACTICE

Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir
Reykjavik University, Graduate School of Science and Engineering, Reykjavik, Iceland

Paper presented as part of requirements for the degree of Master of Project Management (MPM) at the Graduate School of Science and Engineering, Reykjavik University – May 2014

ABSTRACT

Agile methods have gained popularity in recent years within software development. In Scrum, one of the Agile methods, the Product Owner role is crucial for an Agile team to be successful. A Product Owner has many responsibilities and challenges and the role is therefore interesting to research, as he or she is often the link between the business and the development departments of an organization. It is a key role for organizations to be successful in developing and maintaining software. Additionally, the Product Owner role does not have one specific definition in the available literature, and, in particular, the responsibilities described differ.

This case study, conducted at the software development company Spotify, is a description of the Product Owner role. The main focus of the research is to study how the Product Owners identify customers for their teams, how they measure the value of their teams’ work and how they form a vision for their teams. It also describes some of the challenges these Product Owners face each day. Data was gathered by interviewing three Product Owners, a Product Manager and a ScrumMaster. The interviews were supported by direct observation on site.

The results indicate that Product Owners are in practice well aware of their responsibilities when it comes to customer involvement, vision and value, and attend to those in one way or another. Because the organization has been growing quickly in recent years, the Product Owners have had to focus more on their inward facing responsibilities, dealing with their own teams to make sure they are functional. The results indicate that when these challenges have been met the Product Owners can look ahead to the future and start to focus on customer involvement, the vision of the product and the value their team is delivering, and all the challenges that emerge when they deal with this part of their role. The Product Owner role is as diverse as the literature describes it and the challenges a Product Owner faces each day are many. The Product Owners need to have one foot in the daily work and one foot in the future, and to lead people to work on the right things at any given moment.

Keywords: Project Management, Product Management, Agile, Agile Methods, Scrum, Product Owner (PO), Software Development
1. INTRODUCTION

Project management in software development has been going through some transformation in recent years where traditional project management methods have been challenged by Agile methods (Cervone, 2010). Traditional project management requires the scope of a project to be defined at an early stage and a significant part can therefore be planned up front, while Agile methods give more space for changes as work is broken down into small segments of the overall project, called iterations or sprints.

Roman Pichler (2010) describes the role of the Product Owner as a new, multi-faced role that unites authority and responsibility that traditionally was scattered across separate roles, such as the customer, the project manager and the product manager, so when using Agile methods the role of the Product Owner in some ways replaces the traditional project or product manager and even the customer. In addition Pichler states that the Product Owner has the authority to set goals and shape the vision of a product and therefore he or she is not just a project manager that writes requirements and does prioritization for the team.

The role of the Product Owner has not had much focus in the academic research; the main focus has been on productivity, teamwork and collaborative decision-making in Agile teams rather than on specific Agile roles. Senapathi & Srinivasan (2012) point out that prior studies on Agile methods have paid more attention to examining factors that drive organizations to initially adopt Agile methods than to those that affect their continued usage. Sverrisdottir, Ingason and Jonasson (2014) report that Product Owners in Scrum projects in Iceland use different project management methods that best fit their operations.

The use of Agile methods is constantly increasing in software development (Cooper, 2014) and thus the role of the Product Owner is interesting as this role is often the link between the business and the development departments of an organization, so it is a key role for organizations to be successful in developing and maintaining software. Mirsa (2011) says that one of the important principles of Agile methods is to give high importance to customers, thus aiming to satisfy customers by producing valuable pieces of final product early in the development lifecycle.

This paper is a case study conducted at the software development company Spotify at the end of February 2014. It is a description of the role of the Product Owner at this point in time, where the main focus of the research is to find out how the Product Owners identify customers for their teams, how they measure the value of their teams’ work, how they form a vision and communicate that to their teams, what their challenges are and how they deal with those challenges.

The questions of this research are:

1. What are the main responsibilities of the Product Owners? Particularly:
   a. How do Product Owners identify customers for their teams?
   b. How do they measure the value of their teams’ work?
   c. How do they form the product vision for their teams?

2. What are the challenges for a Product Owner and how does he or she deal with them?
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on Agile methods, the teamwork of Agile teams and the role of the Product Owner.

2.1. Agile Methods

The origin of Agile project management was first noted in a paper by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1986), but Agile as a methodology gained attraction when Sutherland and Schwaber (1995) discussed the first Agile method (also called Agile processes) for software development at the 1995 OOPSLA conference. They had analysed common software development processes and found that traditional development approaches were not suitable for empirical, unpredictable and non-repeatable processes such as the development of software.

Today Agile methods are used in several different ways within organizations across the globe and Agile is an umbrella term for methods such as Scrum, XP, Kanban and many more, although those three are considered the most widely adopted approaches in the world (Strode, Huff, Hope & Link, 2012). Underlying all of these various methods are four basic concepts from the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development” (Beck et al, 2001):

(1) Individuals and interactions over processes and tools.
(2) Working software over comprehensive documentation.
(3) Customer collaboration over contract negotiation.
(4) Responding to change over following a plan.

Software development projects are usually dynamic; requirements, designs, test processes and functionalities change over the lifetime of the project or the development of a product. It is important for the business and the development teams to work together for the entire duration (Mirsa, 2011).

2.2. The Agile team and the Product Owner

There are three roles in Scrum: the Product Owner, the development team and the ScrumMaster. Management responsibilities are divided among these three roles (Schwaber, 2004).

Schwaber (2004, p. 6-7) defines the Product Owner role as follows:

“The Product Owner is responsible for representing the interests of everyone with a stake in the project and its resulting system. The Product Owner achieves initial and ongoing funding for the project by creating the project’s initial overall requirements, return on investment (ROI) objectives, and release plans. The list of requirements is called the Product Backlog. The Product Owner is responsible for using the Product Backlog to ensure the most valuable functionality is produced first and built upon; this is achieved by frequently prioritizing the Product Backlog to queue up the most valuable requirements for the next iteration.”

Agile methods advocate that development teams are self-organized, meaning that the individuals on the team should figure out how they can best work together as a
team. These motivated individuals should be provided the environment and support needed to make them successful (Mirsa, 2011). Agile teams should have a common focus, mutual trust and the ability to organize repeatedly to meet new challenges. Self-organised does not mean leaderless, uncontrolled teams but that the leadership is meant to be light-touch and adaptive, providing feedback and subtle direction. Leaders of Agile teams are responsible for setting direction, aligning people, obtaining resources and motivating the team (Hoda, Noble & Marshall, 2011). According to Cohn (2010) a leader can be anyone with influence or authority over the team and can include managers, Product Owners and the ScrumMaster.

According to Drury, Conboy & Power (2012) Agile teams focus more on tactical rather than strategic decisions. A likely explanation is that working in time-boxed iterations gives the team a short-term focus, usually of 2–4 weeks in duration. Teams can therefore lose sight of the organization’s goals for customer delivery and how their decisions fit into these goals, i.e. strategic decisions, focusing instead on decisions to complete their daily task load. And as the product matures and incremental updates are released, the visioning effort usually declines (Pichler, 2010).

Both the developing team and the people driving the business in an organization need to work with each other to be able to come up with the final required product (Mirsa, 2011). This is where the Product Owner comes in; he or she is the link between the customer or user side of an organization, the organization’s vision, and then the development team, so that the team is working on the right things for both the customer and the organization. The team and the Product Owner should constantly collaborate, planning together how to get the most value for the business (Schwaber, 2004). Furthermore, Agile methods advocate high levels of collaboration between the development team and their customers in order to frequently release product features that deliver business value in each iteration (Hoda et al., 2011).

The primary duties of the Product Owners on an Agile or a Scrum team include making sure that all the team members are pursuing a common vision for the project, establishing priorities so that the highest-valued functionality is always being worked on, and making decisions that lead to a good return on the investment in the project or for the product (Cohn, 2010). The Product Owner should focus on business goals, as the team is better suited to figuring out how to solve something (Kniberg, 2007). In commercial software development, the Product Owner is often someone from the marketing or production management side of an organization (Cohn, 2010).

According to Pichler (2010) the Product Owner should lead the development to create a product that generates the desired benefits. This includes creating the product vision, prioritizing the product backlog, planning the releases, involving stakeholders, managing the budget, preparing the product launch, attending meetings, collaborating with the team and probably many more tasks that fall on the Product Owner’s desk each day. The Product Owner plays a crucial part in bringing new products to life and also when managing the product lifecycle (Pichler, 2010).

Cohn (2010) states that the Product Owner role can be one of the most challenging on a team because he or she needs to address inward and outward facing needs at all times. The former being participation in daily stand-up meetings, reviews and retrospectives, as well as management meetings, managing the product backlog, answering questions from the team and simply being available to the team as much as possible. Outward facing, he or she needs to attend to user’s needs, manage
stakeholder expectations, prioritize the product backlog, develop a product strategy and more. Furthermore Cohn (2010) says that the Product Owner’s role should provide just enough of a boundary around the project that the team is motivated to solve the difficult problems, but not so many boundaries that solving the problems becomes impossible. In that way the role is more of an art than a science.

Pichler (2010) says that successful Product Owners need the following characteristics: visionary and doer; leader and team player; communicator and negotiator; empowered and committed and available and qualified. These are similar to the characteristics Cohn (2010) wants to see in a Product Owner: available, business savvy, communicative, decisive and empowered.

Galen (2013) states that the role of the Product Owner is the most difficult one within the Agile or Scrum team. A Product Owner needs to be a highly skilled individual who understands the nuance of the role and is also enabled by the organization to take the time necessary to fully engage teams in value-based delivery. A great Product Owner is a member of his team and should consider the team his primary customer; he also needs to respond to them first. Product Owners are a distinct member of the team in which overall success or failure is a joint endeavour. In this way the team connects to the Product Owner and to the work to deliver business value – not only for the business, but because they believe in the work they are doing – by ensuring they meet customer and business needs, not by perception or assumption, but by listening to the customer, engaging in frequent demonstrations, and by embracing and reacting to feedback. The Product Owner needs to give the team the right things to do and make sure they do everything possible to qualify the work the teams are delivering (Galen, 2013).

Galen (2013) also states that the role is a leadership role as the Product Owner is synonymous with the customer and this brings tremendous leadership and guidance responsibility. He says that because the skill requirements are so broad and intimidating the role is difficult to staff with a single individual and that might be the reason why organizations minimize it so often.

Table 1 summarizes what the literature on the Product Owner role states on the responsibilities the Product Owner has to attend to in his daily role for him to be successful and what this case study focuses on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility</th>
<th>Cohn</th>
<th>Galen</th>
<th>Pichler</th>
<th>Schwaber</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer involvement</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging role</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Table 1, Cohn, Galen and Pichler agree that these four responsibilities are a part of the Product Owner’s role, but Schwaber focuses more on customer involvement and value. All four of them also add other responsibilities that the Product Owner needs to attend to in his daily role, but which are not part of this case study.
3. RESEARCH PROJECT

As little research exists on the role of the Product Owner this study is exploratory in nature and examines the Product Owner in his natural setting. The research is a qualitative multiple-case study (Yin, 2009) conducted at Spotify at the end of February 2014.

3.1. Research Design

According to Yin (2009) case studies are the preferred method when 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events and the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context. Yin also states that the case study method allows the investigator to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, such as organizational and managerial processes. As the researcher had the chance of conducting research into the Product Owner role at Spotify’s headquarters in Stockholm, this research method was chosen. The multiple-case study approach can be used as a cross-case analysis and provides an opportunity to see if findings are the same across cases, which may provide some foundation for generalization. However, it is difficult to generalize findings from this limited number of units of analysis and they can only suggest they may be presented in other cases.

3.2. Data Gathering Method

The primary data collection method was in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with five employees at Spotify. The first step in data gathering was to prepare the interview protocol and pilot test it prior to the study. After the pilot test there were minor changes to the protocol. Then the questions were divided into four sections in relation to the Product Owner role: customer involvement, value, vision and challenges, and then codes for data analysis were made for these four sections. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and then transcribed verbatim. Their length was between 50–65 minutes. The quotations in the results chapter are not always verbatim but are slightly rephrased to be more readable and representative.

The interviews were supported by direct observation on site: by shadowing a Product Owner for a day to observe his daily role, by being present at stand-up meetings with the participants’ teams and by talking to people around the organization. The shadowing included being present in all meetings the Product Owner had that day: stand-up meetings with his teams, one-on-one meetings with his team members and managerial meetings. As well as transcripts from the interviews, source data included field notes from the observation, documents and photographs taken at site. The researcher spent three days at Spotify, finishing each day by documenting the observations as field notes and then using the next day to seek clarification and ask more questions.
3.3. Analysis

The analysis strategy was designed to identify and divide the results into the four sections this case study focuses on: customer involvement, value, vision and challenges, and the questions in the interviews represented one of these four groups. The source documents were grouped by each participant, analysed by the use of the codes and then compared. Finally, conclusions were drawn from the data collected.

Emphasis was put on understanding the participants’ experience of the role of the Product Owner and their different views. The researcher documented an objective assessment of the interpretations by the participants of their reality. To address the research questions, the transcripts and field notes were read several times to obtain insight into each case. Data was collected from three different Product Owners at Spotify. Then data was added from interviews with a Director of Product Development and a ScrumMaster (called Agile Coach at Spotify) to ensure different viewpoints. The data gathered was validated when two or more participants communicated the same or similar views. The researcher’s contact at Spotify read a late draft of the paper and made a few comments on it.

3.4. Participants

As this is a case study the participants were selected in consultation with the researcher’s contact at Spotify. The contact booked the interviews but made sure the participants were scattered across the organization to ensure that the participants did not all have the same background and were working in different projects and with different parts of the software.

The units of analysis were three Product Owners, but interviews were also conducted with one Director of Product Development (previously a Product Owner) and one Scrum Master to get a better view of the role of the Product Owner and his challenges. One of the Product Owners also had the role of an Agile Coach at the time of the interview.

The participants had various backgrounds; most of them started as developers but had changed roles – two participants said it was because they like to give their opinion on the way things are done and so they were asked to take the role of the Product Owner on a team. The others happened to take on this role when the teams were set up according to Scrum. The Product Owners work in different parts of the organization, which might explain differences in their opinions.

3.5. Company

Spotify was founded in 2006 in Sweden and in 2008 it released it’s core product, a music player that can be used online or downloaded as an app on desktops or mobiles. Its users have access to one of the fastest-growing catalogues of licensed music in the world (Spotify, n.d.). The organization has grown tremendously since it was founded, has a good track record of product delivery and its products are loved by users and artists (Kniberg, 2013). Active users are growing fast; there were over 20 million at the beginning of 2013 and paying subscribers were around 5 million (Kniberg, 2013). At the time of this case study Spotify’s employees numbered
around 1,000 with software development taking place in three locations: Stockholm, Gothenburg and New York. Spotify has used Agile methods in one form or another since it was founded in 2006. Their teams, which are called squads, used Scrum in the past, but when they started delivering all tasks ahead of the end of each three-week sprint they decided that each team could be completely autonomous in the way they work. Some teams use Scrum today but that is a minority of all the development teams. Most of the teams use Kanban or some form of that Agile method. But each team still has a Product Owner and a ScrumMaster.

Each team should have a long-term mission such as building and improving a specific client or experience, scaling the backend systems or providing payment solutions. The responsibility of the Product Owner, according to Ivarsson and Kniberg (2012), is prioritizing the work to be done by the team, but he or she should not be involved with how the team does their work. Ideally each team is fully autonomous with direct contact with their stakeholders, and no blocking dependencies to other teams. The teams are encouraged to apply Lean Startup principles, such as minimum viable product, which means they should release software early and often, and validated learning, that is using metrics and A/B testing, which is a form of randomized experiment with two variants (A and B) that are controlled for a number of participants, to find out what works and what doesn’t. This is summarized in the slogan “Think it, build it, ship it, tweak it” (Ivarsson & Kniberg, 2012).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

In this section the research results are divided into sub two chapters. The first sub chapter presents results for the three responsibilities of the Product Owner; customer involvement, value and vision. The second sub chapter presents the challenges the Product Owner had in practice.

4.1. Responsibilities

Customer involvement

The Product Owners that participated in the research worked with different kinds of teams; those that develop new features and those that work on infrastructure or measurements that other teams then use to build their features on. The Product Owners did agree that the teams should know who their customer is, but they did not all find it to be their responsibility to identify those customers and their needs or to communicate those needs to their team so that the teams are working on the most valuable tasks for the customer at any given time. Some felt strongly about it being their responsibility while others found it to be a team effort and not even something they should think about in their role. Some said that the Product Owner should make sure this discussion takes place within their team. Some of the Product Owners tried to bring end user focus to their teams by pointing out that even though their team was working on a platform for an internal customer the team members still have to think of the end user as a customer.
As one participant said: “We [Product Owners] should represent the customers’ interest, we are here to deliver something that users want to use and will love. Our success should ultimately be customers who love the product.” But another one said: “I would say that both the Product Owner and the team have an input on what the users want; it might not be only the Product Owner’s responsibility to communicate that to the team, but he should be the one seeing to it that we know what the customers’ needs are.” One participant said that in a very broad sense this was his responsibility and in his daily work he talked to a lot of people in the organization to find out where there is a need for his team to come in and work for other teams.

Some of the participants mentioned customer services as being their main connection to the end user. They felt that if the users are not happy with the software or the changes the teams are making to it then they should see that in the number of complaints from users and, ultimately, in the number of users, and that they should take action if that number is going down. Spotify’s success should therefore be judged by the number of users – if the number is going up the users are satisfied and vice versa: “Internally I play devil’s advocate; I try to empathize with the users and make clear to the team that everyone depends on us by asking questions like: If we break something who will that affect?”

One Product Owner mentioned that his team tried to write user stories to put themselves in their user’s situation and figure out what their needs are. He believed that it is his responsibility to make the team focus on why it is working on this specific task rather than on another one, but he said that it can be a challenge as there are developers who are happy to continue writing software and not release anything to the end user. He would like his developers to think of the end user and get the software out to them as soon as possible: “For me the heart of agility is getting software to users and learning from them, listening to them and getting feedback fast, and that’s all there is to it.”

Value

Most of the Product Owners found it difficult to measure the value of the work their team was doing because often there was no transaction of money taking place. They tried to use measurements but the teams themselves did not always control those, as they are mostly working for internal customers, so it was hard to figure out what of the actual end value is generated from each team. As one Product Owner put it: “We see very little money here as Product Owners, it is strange but I don’t concern myself with money at all actually.”

Spotify tracks global user satisfaction usage for changes to the software, but as the iterative changes to the software are so incremental it is difficult for the user to see them or know about them. So the Product Owners use the number of users as their main parameter of success. Then they try to build a dependency chain on metrics and work with hypothesis, for example: if Spotify has more music they have more users, if users collect more music they’ll play more music, if users are able to find music easily they’ll collect more music and so on.

One participant said that it should be up to the team to deliver return on investment, not the Product Owner. He or she should just be the contact point for other parts of the organization to make it a bit easier for the team to work uninterrupted, but in the best of teams the Product Owner is just another team member and the team as
a whole sets the goals that then bring value to the organization. If the Product Owner tries to do it by himself chances are that the team will not buy into the goals: “You can usually see when the team has set the goals as a whole rather than the goals being delivered from someone else.”

One participant said that his team did not measure return on investment in any way and that verbal feedback from his internal customer was what he focuses on. His gut feeling was therefore his main form of measurement.

**Vision**

When the participants were asked if they lead the vision of the product development for their teams most of them agreed that it was a difficult responsibility that they struggled with. One participant said: “I think it’s important that the Product Owners see to it that the team has a vision – that they know what it is – but I don’t think it is solely the Product Owner who creates that vision, I think that the team does that together, but the Product Owner is responsible for them having it”.

The Product Owners do not always know what that vision is, as the organization has been growing so fast and the vision of a team tends to change relatively quickly: “Speaking completely openly it is something we are struggling with, this question of the vision and sharing it with the other teams, because we are big and distributed. So how do you share that vision? I think we overcomplicate it at the moment and I think we just need an objective and should focus less on measurements.”

Each team is encouraged to come up with five measurable goals each quarter but one of the participants said that he doesn’t like that because he thinks that often metrics get gamed, especially if they come from the top down. He would rather have a vision set at the top and then trust the teams and let them prove to the organization that what they are doing is moving the whole organization in the right direction. Another participant agreed on this – the Product Owner should provide a vision – but said that somebody had to provide him with the organizational vision that enables him to do that; the Product Owner cannot come up with the vision all on his own.

One participant said that he’d like to think that he facilitates the visionary activities for his team. But he said that his team has a much better insight into the needs of the customers as it is working much closer with them than he is. He is at a higher level so he trusts his team to have a lot of input into the vision of the development: “I get a very fluffy high level overview but the team has very concrete details so I facilitate the vision but they provide most of it.”

Another participant said he had a clear vision of how his product should be developed but the organization as a whole did not have a shared vision for the end product. He said his team starts to converge of this unspoken vision every two or three months, so they sit down and have a conversation about it, but they never write it down; their world is changing so fast that they don’t want to put it in a document that is obsolete in a few weeks. Another participant involves others in the visioning activities but then he communicates the vision: “High-level vision for the company takes place in broad hall meetings. That’s for the entire company and then I translate that into the reasons why we are doing the things we are doing now.”
One participant said that his team works to some extent with story mapping to try to figure out what the big items for the future could be, but as their goals change so quickly its extremely hard to work on a long-term basis: “The longest project I've seen so far has been about a year. And the business landscape has typically changed so much over time that at the end the product might not be quite right; good examples are the download store and the iPod integration which were a good idea at the time but when they were finally released it wasn't anymore. Over all we change the goals, what we prioritize, so often that it's hard to have a longer term vision.”

4.2. Challenges

Part of the case study was to try to get some idea of the challenges a Product Owner faces every day. One participant described the role as a combination of a diplomat adviser and juggler because there are a lot of voices with different needs and the Product Owner needs to communicate with all of them. The best way to do this was to be transparent so people see for themselves why things are done this way and not the other: “Be transparent because you are not going to please everyone all the time. As long as you are transparent about how you are doing things, how you make decisions and why certain things need to be prioritized over other things, you will succeed.”

It is the most challenging role on the team, said one participant, because there is ultimately more responsibility in the Product Owner role than in other roles in the team: “You have all those people wanting things from your team and, for everyone, what they want is very important, and that is the diplomat part of the role. The team should be exposed to this pressure to an extent but the Product Owner should also protect the team from that. The developers need to know they are not working in a vacuum – there are people who really care about what they are delivering – but the Product Owner is also protecting them, which makes it a more challenging role.”

One participant said that the Product Owner role is challenging because even though the team is responsible for their delivery, the Product Owner is at the forefront of that, the one seeing to it that the delivery happens and that it is compatible with what was initially planned: “I think that is a tough thing to have on your shoulders.”

Being a Product Owner also means aligning other people so that everyone has the information they need to do the right job at every given moment: “It's all about alignment and knowing what others are doing. You should not be working in isolation. It’s very hard to do the right thing if you don’t know what others are doing, so the Product Owners are the ones who just make sure that we don’t deviate on our own into what we think it is we should be doing.”

Every Product Owner found it extremely important to spend time with the team every day, as much as they physically could, but some struggled with that as they worked with more than one team and had to attend various meetings. Teamwork and collaborative decision-making seem to play a crucial role in the work the Product Owner does with their team. The Product Owner is often guided by the team in what is technically right, so he has to listen to the team and take their advice on how things should best be done: “I’m there to represent the team’s interests, fight their corner and to make their case. Just this week we said we’re not going to make a release because the quality is not there yet. That message comes from me to the stakeholders but it is informed and guided by the voices of the team.”
The challenge is also that the Product Owner has to be an indirect leader of the team, he has some authority to make decisions for the team but he very rarely wants to act on that authority and be the only one making decisions that affect the whole team and their work: “Product Owners are indirect leaders and many of them are totally inexperienced when it comes to leading someone. Especially if it’s a junior team, so that is a big challenge for a lot of the Product Owners.” The Product Owner has to get people excited and aligned so that they know what is expected of them without actually telling them: “The Product Owner is supposed to lead the team, engage and inspire it, make sure that things are moving forward, but it is very artificial to have just one person that does that – the team itself needs to be interested in these kind of topics and discussions.” And the challenge is also to see what is missing and add that to the mix: “I think the Product Owner role involves picking up the slack, so if something isn’t working then it’s clearly your [the Product Owner’s] fault. Anything that is missing you’ll have to pitch in.”

Most of the Product Owners talked about the stakeholder side as being one of the most challenging parts of their role. It is difficult to motivate a team that does not know for whom it is working and lacks a purpose: “I think the special challenge is that we are not very often doing particularly exciting or glamorous parts of the development, we’re providing a platform, and keeping developers motivated around that is a particular challenge here. And focusing on the user value and remembering that we’ve not just got internal customers, we’ve got users as well.” One participant said that his biggest challenge was to sell his vision of the development to the developers on his team: “The challenge is not only to sell the product to the end users, but to sell the work that the team needs to do to the team. Both are important but if I have to order them it’s selling the work to the developers that is more important.” Part of the role is to trust the team to do their job and leave them to do just that: “Part of our role is actually to back off, let people try things and trust them to do something interesting.”

Communication was also mentioned as being one of the Product Owners’ main challenges: “When the Product Owner is good at communication I see the teams do a really good job and when the Product Owner isn’t good at communication the teams seem to struggle with what they should be working on.” And it’s not enough that the Product Owner is a communicative person but he also has to get other people to speak to each other and see the big picture instead of focusing on their own task: “The more people talk to each other the more they realize that teamwork is important and they get more humble as they know what others are doing instead of getting stuck in their own corner of the universe.”

Every participant said that from experience they would have done some parts of their role differently when they look back, they have come a long way and now find the role a bit easier. The challenges were often the same but in different situations, and they feel they can use previous experience to handle them.

The results can give some indication of the role of the Product Owner at Spotify, how it compares to what the literature has to say about the role and then the challenges he or she faces on a daily basis. The results cannot be used to generalize about the role of the Product Owner at any given organization. It is even hard to generalize for the role of the Product Owner at Spotify, as there are many different Product Owners at different levels of the organization. The challenges might be similar and they might give advice to other Product Owners who deal with similar challenges.
5. DISCUSSION

The results show that the participants are well aware of the responsibilities that are described in the literature and all of them think about those responsibilities in some way or another, although they have different approaches to meeting them in their daily role. As described by both Cohn (2010) and Pichler (2010) the role is multi-faced, both inward and outward facing, and challenging, and the results are similar in that respect. Because Spotify has been growing so fast over the past years it might be that the Product Owners have had to focus more on their inward facing responsibilities, as Cohn (2010) describes them, dealing with their own team to make sure they are functional. The results indicate that when these challenges have been met the Product Owners can look ahead to the future and start to focus on customer involvement, the vision of the product and the value their team is delivering, as these are among the outward facing needs Cohn (2010) describes.

Spotify does not apply a specific framework to the role throughout the organization and therefore it varies from one person to another, both because it is a very communicative role, and people are different when it comes to communication, but also because the role isn’t necessarily the same for an individual working in one part of the organization compared to another part of it.

The participants agreed that the role of the Product Owner is often very complicated and diverse and in some ways it can be hard to describe what the actual daily work is. There are many tasks to juggle each day and the Product Owners often felt that they are not delivering any visible work to the team or the organization.

Kniberg (2013) states that the biggest risk for Spotify is building the wrong product, meaning that the product doesn’t delight users or doesn’t improve success metrics such as user acquisition or user retention. This is what is called ‘product risk’ at Spotify. So how do the Product Owners make sure that the customers (the end users) are represented when the teams plan their work? Within teams that build infrastructure or internal tools, there seems to be a lack of understanding of whether the customer includes the end user or not, that is if the teams should be looking all the way to the end user as the customer or just to the next team they are developing for. The end user is not always in the teams’ minds when they are developing for infrastructure or measurement and we could say that the end user is invisible. There were examples of teams not knowing who their primary customer is. Helping the Product Owners identify their teams’ customers would give the teams a better view of why they are doing what they are doing and hopefully get team members more empowered and more involved in the vision of the development.

As Cohn (2010) says, the Product Owner should establish priorities so that the highest-valued functionality is always being worked on to maximise return on investment. The Product Owners did not think about the value of the tasks their teams are working on and did not prioritize them according to return on investment, mainly because they don’t have the right tools to measure the value of every task. It is also difficult to put a price on something where the amount of effort required to complete it is unknown.

Leading visioning activities for the product and communicating that to the team, as both Cohn (2010) and Pichler (2010) describe, should be the responsibility of the Product Owner, but they all struggle with this part of their role. It is difficult for the...
teams to focus on the big picture when they work on a limited amount of tasks at each time. As the organization is a layer cake of different teams working for the next one, and few are developing directly for the end user, the visionary activities seem to get blurry. There are indications that strategic work is strong for the organization as a whole, but that does not seem to help the Product Owners with their vision for their specific product development and the communication of that to their teams. This is something Spotify might want to look into in order to give the Product Owners the support they need to be able to focus on this part of their role.

This case study has contributed to the software development and project management literature by examining the Product Owner role at Spotify. This is a very complex role that does not have much structure, so what one Product Owner does on a daily basis might not give the right picture of what another one does on the same day. But the findings are interesting with regard to how the Product Owners describe the complexity of the role, how it is much more of a leadership role than a manager role and how communication and people skills are crucial to the skill set of a Product Owner. The Product Owner has to work closely with the team and as soon as the team feels that they don’t have a clear vision of where they are going they might start to drift off and become dysfunctional which again puts more challenges on the Product Owner.

6. CONCLUSION

It seems that the Product Owner role is as diverse in practice as the literature describes it and the challenges a Product Owner faces each day are many, as the results indicate. The Product Owners need to have one foot in the daily work and one foot in the future, and to lead people to work on the right things at any given moment. The Product Owners do not want to use their authority to make decisions for the team but want to get everyone involved in the work, and in that way the team should be able to do a better job.

The Product Owner is not a person who knows it all and has to get support both from his team and his next managers, as one participant put it: “I don’t think the Product Owner is a magical person who has all the answers. You can give a steer on priority, you can help make sure we are focusing on customer value but you don’t have all the answers.”

The Product Owner role seems to be much more of a leadership role in practice than the literature has indicated so far and it would be interesting to research the role in relation to the academic literature on leadership. The main challenge of the Product Owner might therefore be to inspire and encourage team members and get them to talk to each other. If the team members are empowered and interested in their work the challenges seem to become much easier.
7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the participants and people at Spotify for the opportunity to do this research at their offices in Stockholm and for all the answers to the research questions, special thanks to Anders Ivarson who helped with all the arrangements and then read a late draft and gave valuable comments on it. The author also thanks her supervisor Dr. Marta Kristín Lárusdóttir for the guidance and help, for good comments and feedback. And thank you Þórður Bjarki Arnarson for all the support, feedback and help for the past two years.
8. REFERENCES


