A Product Owner's Handbook

Introduction

Product Owner is a vital role in an Agile team who is the visionary of the product. In this Blog, we aim to explain who a product owner is? What are the roles and responsibilities of a PO and what are the traits he/she should possess with a brief guide for a PO in a sprint.

Who is a Product Owner?

Product Owner is the visionary of the project or a product. A person who owns the backlog. A person solely responsible for managing the product backlog. A PO is a person who is accountable to maximizes the outcome delivered to the custom or the consumers.

A product owner is a person who is business oriented and customer/consumer centered. A PO is a person who makes decisions based on stakeholders / business needs and can take help from others but is solely accountable for the outcomes delivered.

Roles and Responsibilities of a PO:

Now that we have a fair idea of who a product owner is, let's have a look at what are the responsibilities of a PO in an Agile Team. PO's responsibilities include,

- Product Visioning
- Empathy mapping and customer understanding
- Creating backlog (User stories, Epics)
- Prioritization of the backlog
- Creating / Setting sprint goals
- Deciding the increments
- Ensuring the product backlog is visible to everyone
- Reviewing the work done by the development team
- Communicating to the stakeholders about the progress and other business metrics
- Collecting feedback from the users / customers

Not a PO's responsibilities :

In a practical scenario, we have seen POs taking up multiple other responsibilities and not doing justice to their role. Here are a few points on what should not be a PO's responsibility. (A PO can help teams in taking up these below mentioned points but is not solely accountable for)

- Resource management
- Scheduling and Managing meetings
- Allocation of tasks and micromanaging
- Billing and Budget management
- Managing reports and dashboards
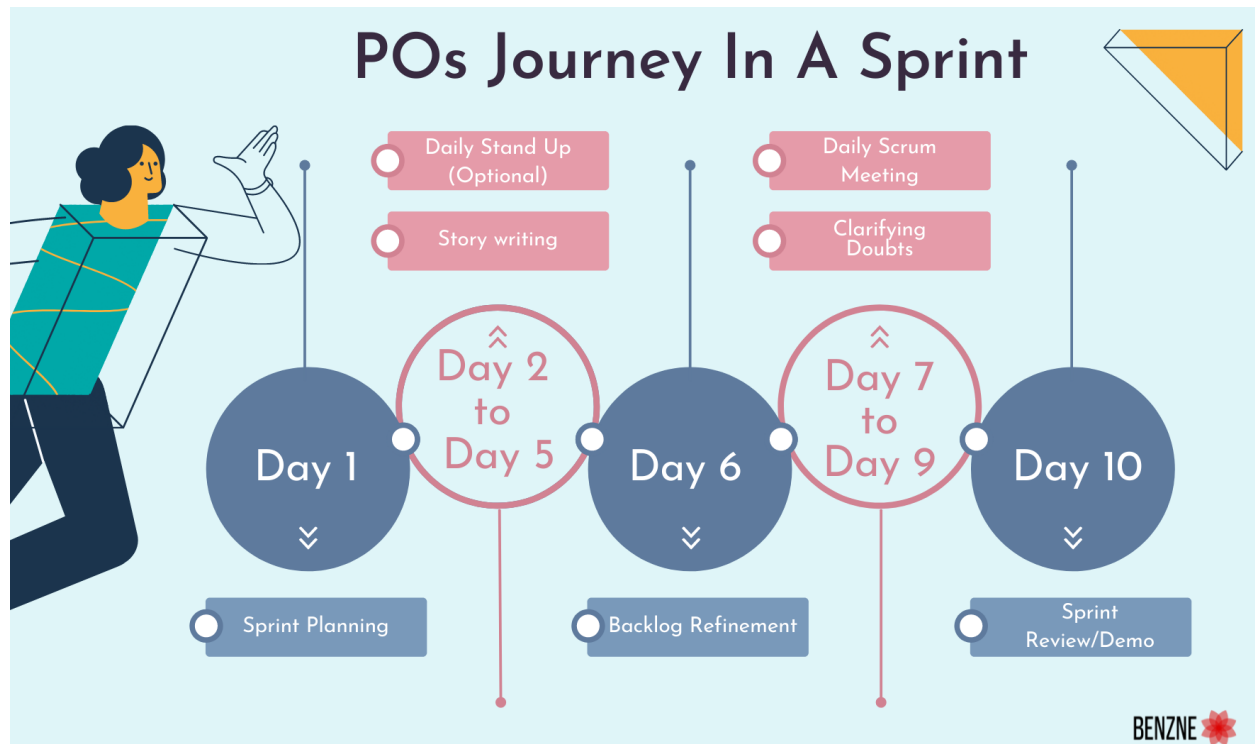- Appraisals and Resource development

Traits Of a good PO :

While we now understand who the product owner is and what are his / her responsibilities. It is also important to understand what a product owner's mindset should be. Here are 5 important traits of a good Product owner

- **Strong Product and Domain Knowledge** : Product Owners are people who will set the direction to the dev team and the product delivery. POs must have a strong hold on the purpose of why the product is being built, what the stakeholders need, what the customers or consumers need to be able to prioritize the work for the team. To be able to manage the increment to deliver value and ensure business needs are met, POs must have a strong Domain and the product knowledge.

- **A customer / consumer representative :** A PO must be the go to person for the team or the management to understand what the customer is looking for or what are their needs. A Po must be able to help/guide others like dev team, stakeholders etc to explain what are the customer's challenges , pain areas , how can we solve their problems. A PO must be able to explain to anyone how our work will affect our customer / consumers.

- **Reachable and Collaborative :** A PO must be available to the dev team always anytime anyday. When there is a question / doubt from the dev team, he / she will have to wait for a response and if the PO is unavailable it might lead to sprint failure and stories might not be complete thus resulting in reduction in velocity and the performance of the team. Hence, a PO must always be available to the team for effective collaboration.

- **Sharp and Authoritative in Decision making :** When it comes to practical scenarios, we all know that everyone has their opinions and suggestions. This will lead to Chaos. A PO can consider the opinions, suggestions but must have the final say and his/her decision is final in terms of "**WHAT TO DO**", "**WHEN TO DO**" and "**HOW TO DO**".

- **A Good communicator :** A PO is a bridge between the dev team and the business team. PO must understand what needs to be communicated to the dev team and to the management team. PO must be able to give feedback to the dev team and also be able to communicate the progress and set right expectations with the business team. To be able to handle different levels of workforce, a PO must possess a good communication skill.

PO's Journey In a Sprint:

Having established traits and responsibilities of a PO, lets see an ideal PO's journey in a sprint of 2 weeks is. This section aims at explaining the activities of a PO in all the ceremonies of a sprint.

Day 1 - Sprint Planning

- Set the Sprint goal and explain the increment purpose to the team
- Explain all the stories planned to the team
- Set the Sprint backlog priority
- Get consensus from the team on the commitment

Day 2 to Day 5 - Daily Stand up and Story writing

- Attend Daily Stand up **(Optional)**
- Be available for the team to help solve doubts and give them direction
- Plan the next increment based on team's velocity
- Story writing and Detailing of the stories prioritized for the next sprint

Day 6 - Backlog Refinement

- Set visibility of what is coming up in the next sprint to the team
- Explain "What" and "How" aspect of all the stories to the team
- Mark team's doubts if its not clear yet
- Mark the dependencies of the team in respective stories

Day 7 to Day 9 - DSM and Clarifying doubts

- Start clarifying the doubts which couldn't be answered in the grooming meeting
- Attend DSMs (Optional 0
- Start working on dependencies (Ex: Get designs , documents attached in the story)
- Be available for the team to help solve doubts and give them direction

Day 10 - Sprint Review / Demo

- Review the work done by the team
- Approve / Reject the story / work item
- Give constructive feedback to the development team
- Collate the feedback in the backlog
- Collect feedback from the customer / stakeholders
- Communicate the progress and metrics to the business team

Conclusion

Product ownership is a very important aspect of an Agile project and is also one of the widely misunderstood concepts. It often gets mixed with the traditional Project Management role. So it is essential for the Product Owner aspirants to understand, digest the role and then take it up to make justice for an Agile team.

Hope this blog helps you understand the PO role, responsibilities, traits and then an ideal sprint journey.. With this, our blog on "A Product Owner's Handbook" comes to an end.
Please reach out to us at "consult@benzne.com" for any feedback , suggestions or questions.

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