

Embracing Uncertainty:

Why Product-Led Organisations Move Forward With Confidence

Stories, tactics and strategies from CPOs



Contents

Introduction

5 Research methodology

Part 1: Product is misunderstood

9 Fear of experimentation

11 Disconnect between teams

13 Product is mistrusted

15 Feature-factory mentality

17 No ownership of outcomes

19 Product isn't represented in the C-Suite

Part 2: The value of product

23 What does successful innovation look like?

25 Product is the answer

26 Introducing the 5 Product Engines

27 C-Suite buy-in

30 Customer-first decision making

33 Launch little and often

36 Aligned and outcome-driven

39 Autonomous teams

Conclusion

43 Chat to us

44 References

The opportunity for successful innovation through product

Innovation is no longer just about growth. When organisations fail to innovate, they fail full stop.

Companies that don't innovate risk falling behind in a market that's filling with younger, more agile businesses. Firms that can experiment more easily and will therefore always be faster to market.

Businesses that are set up to run experiments are primed to take advantage of powerful technologies, like AI, that will put them even further ahead.

Meanwhile, customers are becoming less and less brand loyal. As people find it simpler to switch and change suppliers, large organisations must constantly evolve their products and services to keep up with demand.

Having a strong, trusted brand is no longer enough to grow – look at forgotten Blackberry or HMV, which were dependable household names until they failed to keep up with consumer demand for digitalisation.

In 2024, product innovation drives brand loyalty and ultimately growth. FutureBrand Index's top five brands in 2023 all led technological innovation around essential products and services.

Innovative companies are experimental at the core because it allows them to put the customer at the centre of their decision-making while still considering the whole business. This approach also defines what it means to be product-led.

Product-led organisations are constantly making decisions that balance customer, business and operational needs. This enables them to find new revenue streams and launch new offerings with more certainty and success.

But how do you become product-led when you're a large organisation that doesn't have digital or Agile at its core? This is one of the biggest challenges facing C-Suite leaders today.

Research methodology

Planes ran in-depth, qualitative interviews with over 50 product decision-makers at leading UK businesses including The Economist, Pizza Hut Digital Ventures and Barclays.

We then conducted a survey to refine our findings, with 500 senior product leaders at large businesses across Europe and North America that have 500+ employees or are publicly listed.



NEW LOOK

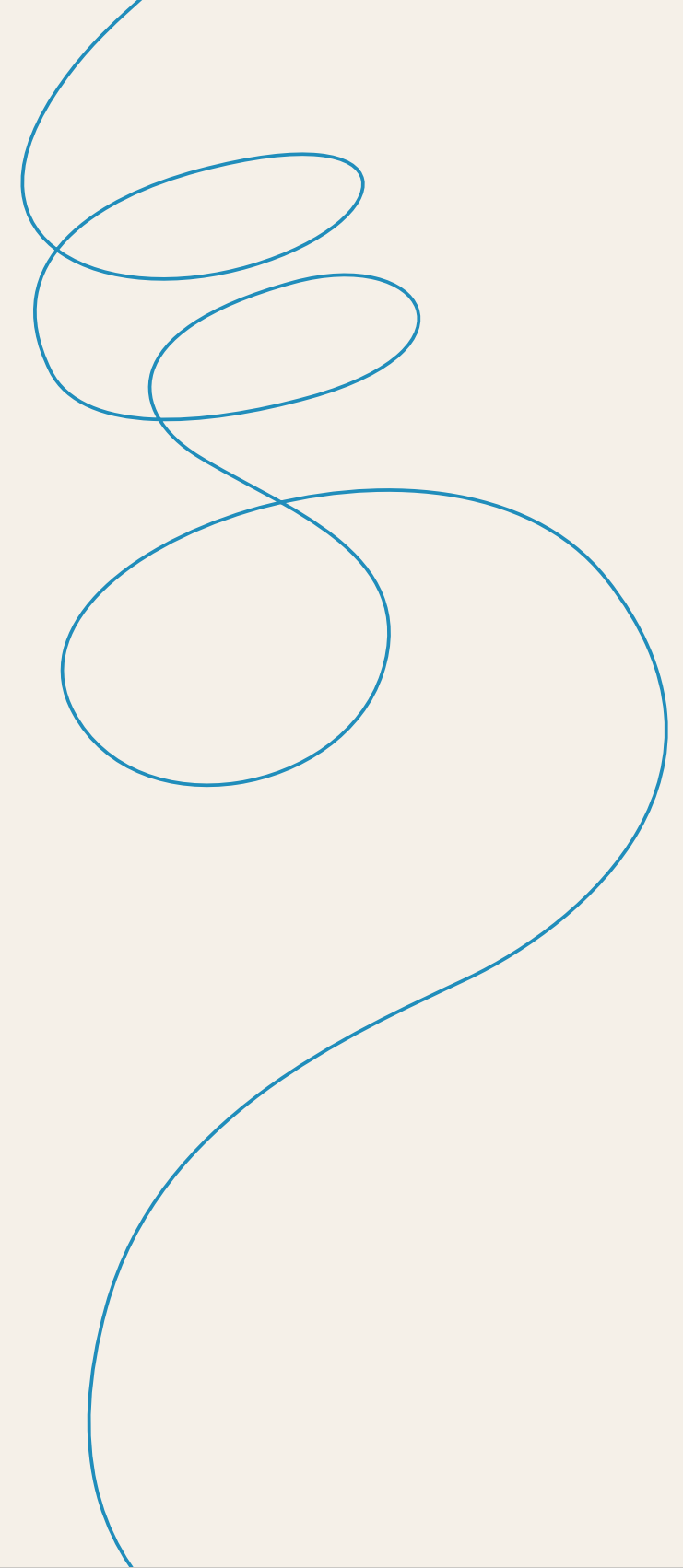


The
Economist



Part 1

Product is misunderstood



Product is critical to growth

95% of product leaders agree a more effective approach to product would improve innovation within their business.

But most large organisations don't fully understand how product can bring value to their company. They also find it hard to implement product processes company-wide.

Almost half of product leaders (43%) don't feel completely or at all confident that product is adequately understood in the C-Suite.

So what are the barriers stopping organisations from innovating through product?

95% of product leaders agree a more effective approach to product would improve innovation in their business

Speaking to more than 50 product leaders at leading UK businesses, we identified the main reasons why implementing product processes at large organisations is difficult.

1 Fear of experimentation

2 Disconnect between teams

3 Product is mistrusted

4 Feature-factory mentality

5 No ownership of outcomes

6 Product isn't represented in C-Suite

1 Fear of experimentation



44% of product leaders don't feel adequately empowered to fulfil their role to the best of their ability.

Those responsible for innovation often get slowed down by stakeholders requiring them to make a business case for huge scopes of work with predicted revenue.

In these cases, the culture is often the blocker to an organisation effectively innovating. A culture that's often tied to unrealistic expectations around ROI and outdated KPIs.

A culture of experimentation is based on the understanding that running short tests is the best way to validate assumptions.

A good product culture requires the whole organisation to be comfortable with uncertainty and failure – because not all ideas turn into successful products.

"The hardest part of launching new things is getting buy-in for the more visionary, unproven product pieces."



Tim Russell

Product Director
Zopa Bank, previously Afterpay

2 Disconnect between teams



61% of product leaders mentioned silos, BAU or competing teams and resources as barriers to success

Product leaders at large organisations can struggle to prioritise innovation when they have to vie for resources and manage competing product teams and roadmaps.

Either this is a case of an organisation's innovation team sitting separately from those implementing the solutions; or it manifests as the team working on business as usual (BAU) (e.g. bug fixes, working on the product roadmap, etc.) not having time to prioritise and work on innovation themselves.

When a team is working on innovation without dedicated resource to implement potential solutions, ideas end up in other teams' backlogs. And those teams have no buy-in to the solutions they're being asked to implement, so they get deprioritised.

"We built a new feature within the product team, then it needed to be handed over to another team. I asked them how long their part would take and they said 6 weeks... It could have been done in a day."



Jennifer Rose

Digital Product, General Manager
New Look

3 Product is mistrusted



Nearly half (43%) of product leaders don't feel completely or at all confident that product is adequately understood in the C-Suite.

In theory, the C-Suite rarely disagrees with the idea of listening to users, making decisions based on data and running frequent low-risk experiments and Agile processes.

In practice, leaders often revert to waterfall practices under stress. It's human nature to look for certainty when things aren't going to plan: like needing specifications before product launch.

When an organisation doesn't understand the value of product, those responsible for it have to spend most of their time making the case for product, rather than just executing it. The role of a CPO is to get teams to work in a 'product way': accept that you don't know all the answers and that you must follow the process to find out.

"When people don't understand what product is in a bigger organisation, you spend a lot of your time bringing people on the journey. It's why you end up having this divide."



Jennifer Rose

Digital Product, General Manager
New Look

4 Feature-factory mentality



Organisations with multiple product teams that are still struggling to innovate often fall back on the 'solution' of building more features.

The 'feature-factory mentality' involves constantly building and launching, but with no tracking of how well those features are performing before the next decision is made. That leaves a roadmap filled with a backlog of features to be built, rather than driven by experiments and problems-to-be-solved.

An output-driven approach blocks organisations from innovating to solve real customer problems or working towards their business outcomes.

5

No ownership of outcomes



One of the blockers stopping organisations from innovating through product is a lack of team ownership of outcomes.

That might look like leaders who are responsible for utilisation but aren't able to actually impact it. More often it looks like developers being asked to build features without knowing why or what impact they're having.

Without access to data and feedback loops, product teams have no way of knowing if their innovation activities are affecting business outcomes.

"Teams should understand how product and business growth are connected. While product teams are focused on driving measurable behaviour change in users, they still need to understand how those metrics ladder up to the business outcomes."



Chloé Hajnal-Corob

Coach and previously VP Product, Trouva

6

Product isn't represented in the C-Suite



When product shows up in the C-Suite everyone starts to advocate for the customer. This makes it more likely that innovation is run and prioritised successfully.

C-Suite leaders are more likely than directors to say the majority of innovation leads to product launch in their organisation. This suggests that product having a seat at the top table, and therefore increased influence, improves the success rate of innovation within a company.

Still, CPOs often don't have as much sway as a CFO or those responsible for sales and marketing, for example.

60% of CPOs cite loneliness as a common aspect of the job

"If there's conflict with the rest of the C-Suite, [CPOs] are the first to go."



Ben Elliott

Co-Founder
Found by Few
Recruitment Agency

Excerpt

The tough role of CPOs

Chief Product Officers play a crucial role in ensuring the continued commercial success of their organisations.

But product leaders at this level are very rarely executing product in their day-to-day. Instead they're managing stakeholders and advocating for product within the C-Suite.

This takes them away from helping the business to successfully innovate: and it's probably one reason why CPOs have the highest turnover in the C-Suite.

The average CPO tenure is 2.6 years: significantly shorter than other C-Suite roles (the average CEO tenure is 3.9 years and it's 4.6 years for a CTO).

Organisations need to enable their CPOs with a good team, buy-in to product and realistic expectations for the role.

Part 2

The value of product



What does successful innovation look like?

There's a lot of disagreement over the definition of innovation. In fact, it can be categorised into three different activities: optimisation, diffusion and disruption.

Whether you're adding a new feature to an existing service (optimisation) or introducing a brand new product to target a new customer segment (disruption), an organisation's approach to innovation should always involve validating ideas by observing real-life behaviour.

"Most companies can do product in terms of optimising product – i.e. they can do delivery management. The majority are bad at strategic product – i.e. using product to create new things. They're just not in that creative mindset."



Andy Wilton

Product Director
CUR8, Previously Infogrid

Not all innovation ideas should end up in market; far from it. But all innovation ideas should be tested through product processes, to give decision-makers the data or prototypes to move past assumptions with confidence.

Less than 50% of innovation ideas should result in product launch

91% of product leaders agree that their organisation is innovating effectively. And the majority of those say 21% to 50% of their innovation leads to product launch.

According to product leaders, then, successful innovation is when less than half of innovation ideas don't lead to launch.

Product innovation is just as much about dropping ideas as it is about proving and launching them. Companies like Amazon are famous for their approach to failing ideas. In contrast, excessive bureaucracy – when ideas never see the light of day due to slow and legacy approval processes – costs the US economy an estimated \$3t a year.

Product is the answer

What's the answer to excessive bureaucracy and innovation getting stuck in the backlog? Product.

Leaders almost unanimously agree that a more effective approach to product would improve innovation within their organisation (95%).

Product encompasses the culture, tools and processes employed by teams and organisations to navigate the reality of uncertainty in business by leading with customer problems and outcome-focused experimentation.

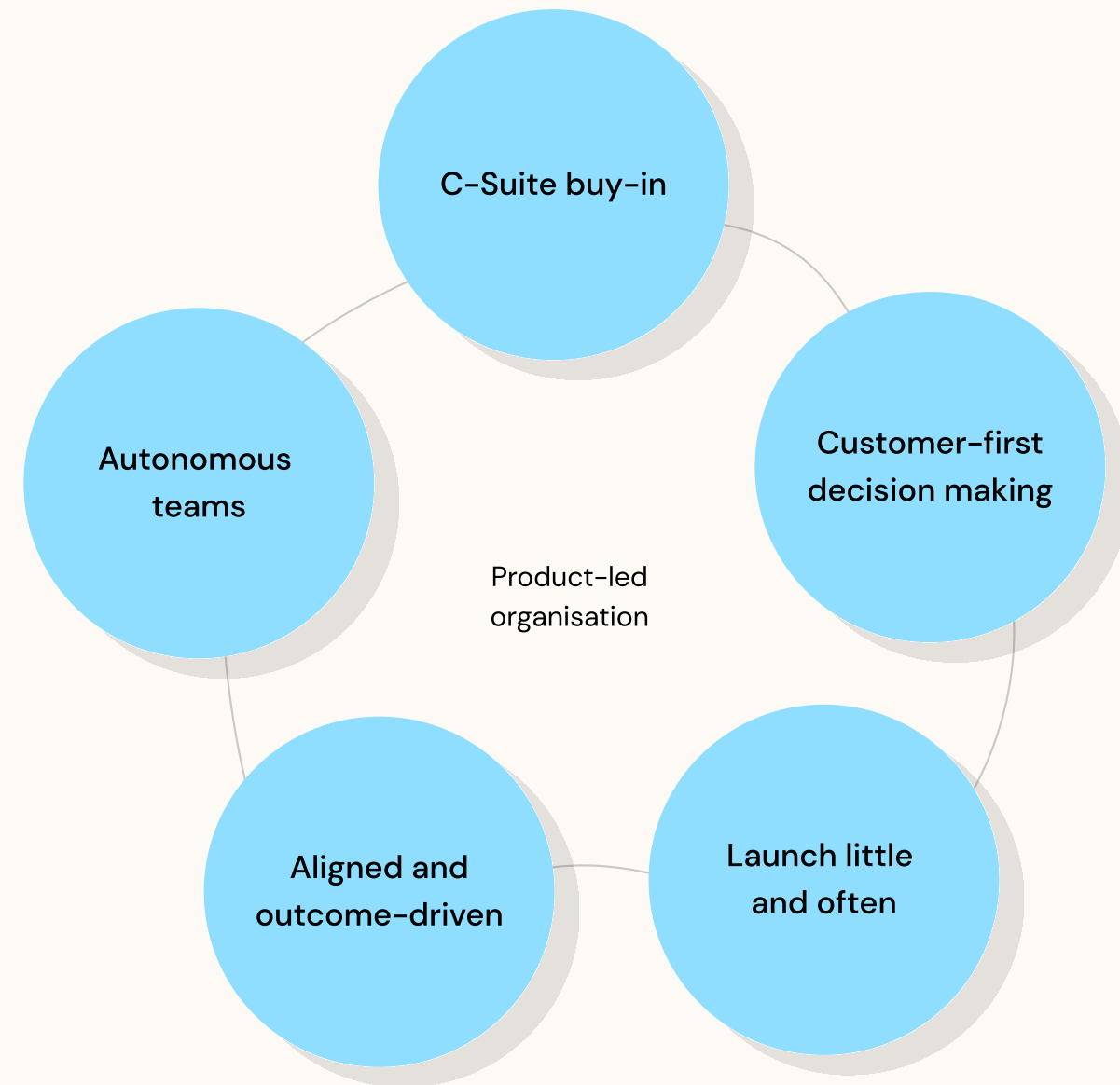
Product-led organisations use product to prioritise and deliver work, shape strategy and deliver towards their outcomes.

So what does a successful product-led organisation look like in practice?

Introducing the 5 Product Engines

The 5 Product Engines is the result of Planes' expertise launching more than 100 products and speaking to product leaders from more than 50 leading UK organisations.

It defines the five key engines that drive a product-led organisation. In order for an organisation to be truly product-led, all five engines need to be performing.



C-Suite buy-in

In order for an organisation to champion a product-led approach, it needs support at the top level. For a company in the early stages of product maturity, getting buy-in from the C-Suite is a good place to start. But it requires constant investment and storytelling around the value of product.

What it looks like

- ✓ There is a CPO or Senior Product Leader who reports directly to the CEO
- ✓ The product strategy has buy-in from leadership and key stakeholders
- ✓ The product role is defined and widely understood throughout the company

What it doesn't look like

- ✗ Silos prevent a holistic understanding of the business
- ✗ Conflicting priorities between teams
- ✗ A misunderstanding of the value of "product"

Case Study

Starting at the top with one of the world's most popular websites

One way to get company-wide buy-in for product is to define one methodology as your gold standard.

A leading tech business with tens of millions of monthly users adopted an Amazon method: it gets teams to start a project by writing a press release for any new product or feature, based on customer needs.

As a result, they have seen more organic adoption of teams owning metrics and outcomes.

"When your product function is still young, you need to get some early wins in. Set some simple goals and deliver against them to build confidence, before pivoting to a more outcome-based approach."



Remy Becher

Chief Product & Technology Officer
Stepathlon, previously The Economist

How to improve C-Suite buy-in

- 1 Those responsible for product need to get wins on the board early to help build trust. This buys more space to do more product.
- 2 To convince other C-Suite leaders of the value of product, start small to get some early wins. While you ultimately should be focusing on outcomes rather than outputs, sometimes it helps to set achievable goals and build tangible features first.
- 3 Getting buy-in for product is about good storytelling. Successful product leaders define a narrative or strategy and use this to start each meeting.

Customer-first decision making

Good experimentation starts with user problems. Product-led organisations make decisions that always consider the customer, through research, data and testing.

What it looks like

- ✓ Everyone knows who the customer is and what success looks like for their team
- ✓ Regular user research to listen to the customer at all stages of the user journey
- ✓ Building things that solve real user problems

What it doesn't look like

- ✗ Decision-making is in the hands of the most senior person in the room, regardless of insights
- ✗ Sales-led development

Case Study

The Economist

Leading with the customer to simplify The Economist's digital offering

The Economist were able to simplify their app ecosystem by focusing on the customer experience.

They had multiple apps in the app store, which was a customer pain point. To solve this, they needed to decommission a legacy app – but it still had 50,000 paying customers.

By explaining the customer benefits and current pain points to stakeholders, they were able to get buy-in for a strategy that would successfully streamline their digital offering.

"My role is to make sure we have strong user advocacy and user research. So that every decision the organisation makes – whether that's within product or the wider go-to-market strategy – is based on what the customer wants."



Simon Jaffery-Reed

Chief Product Officer
Chambers & Partners

How to improve customer-first decision making

- 1 Many product leaders speak to the importance of talking to users every day and recruiting 'super fans' to give regular feedback.
- 2 User journey mapping to understand the context of product use – both before and after use – gives greater insight to triggers for use and motivations.
- 3 Focusing on customer pain points helps unify stakeholders and identify opportunities for improvement in the organisation's digital product offering.

"Product people have to have a lot of empathy"



Remy Becher

Chief Product & Technology Officer
Stepathlon, previously The Economist

Launch little and often

Product-led organisations are able to run small experiments that help them manage risk.

What it looks like

- ✓ Managing risk by taking small bets first
- ✓ Building and deploying weekly
- ✓ Cross-functional teams where tooling and data are self-serviceable

What it doesn't look like

- ✗ Big bang releases of entire products or similar
- ✗ Multi-year projects
- ✗ Siloed teams or teams that are blocked by other teams' priorities
- ✗ Unchecked assumptions

Case Study



Launching a unique loyalty proposition with a technically feasible prototype

Ennismore is a global collective of entrepreneurial and founder-built brands with creativity and purpose at their heart, such as The Hoxton, Mondrian, and Mama Shelter. They wanted to offer something new.

Tapping into a consumer mindset – the desire for new experiences coupled with instant gratification – Ennismore developed Dis-loyalty; a unique loyalty proposition brought to life through a mobile-first site.

We helped confirm the feasibility of the platform by building a working proof of concept in 2 days. With this knowledge, we went on to launch a product that brings together more than 80+ hotels and 170+ restaurants and bars.

Want to unlock an innovation idea?

We've helped organisations like Ennismore take the next best step for their business with a 2-week sprint of strategic and technical tests. It'll uncover whether your innovation idea is worth progressing.

At the end of the 2 weeks, you'll get a design prototype or technical proof of concept and a clear picture of whether your idea can work in the real world.



Let's chat

Email CJ at cj@planes.studio

How to improve

- 1 Organisations that are successful at launching 'little and often' will focus on outcomes over outputs in their roadmap.
- 2 Successful product leaders focus on establishing strong DevOps practices around continuous testing, integration and deployment to remove practical impediments to deploying frequently.
- 3 If structural changes are a blocker, more accessible changes can be made – such as finding an audience subset to release to and test with.
- 4 Other organisations will spin off a satellite venture with a whole new brand, to test a new proposition with less risk to the main business.
- 5 Some organisations spoke to having self-service tooling that doesn't require dependencies between teams but provides a common view on product data.

"We built a beta version of the Barclays app called 'Launchpad'. It was exactly the same as our normal banking app but for early adopters: so users would see and test new features. It was a great way for us to launch things without impacting millions of customers."



Zainab Kwaw-Swanzy
Senior Product Manager
Barclays

Aligned and outcome-driven

Prioritising outcomes over outputs is essential for any product-led organisation.

What it looks like

- ✓ Teams align on opportunities before solutions
- ✓ Each team has clear priorities and tracks metrics appropriate to their function
- ✓ Each feature on the roadmap has been prioritised against product outcomes
- ✓ The product outcomes clearly translate back to the overall business strategy
- ✓ Experiments are measured against outcomes and the data is used to define the next iteration

What it doesn't look like

- ✗ A feature factory: teams churning out a backlog of features that haven't been validated or prioritised
- ✗ Iterations halted because the numbers don't match a business case

Case Study

Legal

Testing new propositions to meet an outcome worth £675m

A leading legal rankings firm spotted a huge opportunity to reach a new audience and open up a new share of revenue potentially worth £675m – it just didn't know how.

To identify a proposition idea that met this desired outcome, and was feasible for the business and desirable for their target audience, Planes interviewed the organisation's partners. We then delivered two coded prototypes using real data.

The final output was a single strategy and a new platform that addresses their partner audience's appetite for insights and intelligence with a new marketable offering.

"In an economic downturn more innovation comes to life. This implicates budgets within big corporates, which forces teams to focus on specific initiatives. The hyper-focus on outcomes rather than outputs helps organisations focus on the right opportunities."



Becki Lake

Head of Product
Etc. (BT Group)

How to improve

- 1 Organisations that are successfully outcome-driven help their teams trace their metrics back to top-line business metrics using driver trees or other impact models.
- 2 Product leaders should consider defining a north star metric to help the organisation align around outcomes
- 3 Product leaders spoke to the importance of have a common view of company priorities with the scope of individual teams well defined, to ensure initiatives are not duplicating work

"Talking about outcomes over output is the way to do product."



Serena Chana

Product Manager
GoCardless

Autonomous teams

An organisation with autonomous teams can quickly experiment because teams are able to operate independently and deploy into production without being blocked.

What it looks like

- ✓ Everyone can articulate the product vision and priorities
- ✓ There is an agreed set of principles that guide ways of working as a product team
- ✓ Everyone has the autonomy and the ability to run experiments

What it doesn't look like

- ✗ Micro-managed teams
- ✗ Leadership dropping into projects and questioning decision-making

Case Study



Improving the infrastructure for autonomous teams at Spotify

Spotify aims to have teams that can quickly turn ideas into products and experiment to improve the user experience.

They have an “ops in squad” model where every team has all the skills needed to ship a feature, and is responsible for that feature end-to-end.

To enable these squads to be highly autonomous, Spotify is constantly working to build products that empower their engineers and reduce the number of technology choices that teams have to make.

By automating one workflow, Spotify reduced the time it took a developer to get a campaign website up and running from 14 days to less than 5 minutes.

“Product culture is about allowing innovation to happen at every level. Innovation comes from the people actually working in the team.”



Max Nguyen

Senior Product Manager
Pizza Hut Digital Ventures

How to improve

- 1 To establish autonomous teams, product leaders used the example of consulting teams when formulating the product strategy.
- 2 Leadership have a coaching mindset focused on understanding the problem more than offering solutions.
- 3 Organisations with a successful autonomous culture hire people with a culture and mindset that aligns with their product goals.

"We have multidisciplinary product 'pods' made up of a product manager, design, UX research and a few developers. We report into the CTO at the ideation stage and then we have the freedom to test and launch ideas, taking them end-to-end which limits cross-department bottlenecks."



Phillip Herndon

Senior Product Manager
National Geographic

Conclusion

Being experimental is essential to keep up with industry changes.

Most organisations know this. They know they need to be product-led to innovate successfully. They're just not so sure what that looks like in practice. But unlocking those product process and culture changes will help build a well-oiled experimentation machine that will future-proof any organisation.

Being 'product-led' doesn't mean product people leading the business. It means building a shared vision for the product strategy across cross-functional teams – so the whole organisation can experiment based on data.

CPOs are critical for this organisational change: to lead by example and champion the customer at the top table.

Which of the 5 Product Engines does your organisation need help with?

Take the next best step and chat to us if you'd like a bespoke assessment of your organisation's product maturity.



Let's chat

Email CJ at cj@planes.studio



References

[🔗 A Look Back At Why Blockbuster Really Failed And Why It Didn't Have To](#)

Forbes

[🔗 John Lewis turnaround timeframe extended amid fresh losses](#)

The Guardian

[🔗 Innovation Defined: The Differences Between Optimizing, Diffusing, & Disrupting](#)

Nobl Academy

[🔗 Start Stopping Faster](#)

Harvard Business Review

[🔗 Working Backwards: Insights, Stories, and Secrets from Inside Amazon](#)

Colin Bryar & Bill Carr

[🔗 Feature-driven Roadmap vs Experiment-driven Roadmap](#)

Janna Bastow

[🔗 How We Improved Developer Productivity for Our DevOps Teams](#)

Spotify

[🔗 The One Thing That Immediately Kills Your Company](#)

Corporate Rebels