

SECOND EDITION

42 PRODUCT OWNER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

TO AVOID HIRING AGILE IMPOSTERS

Stefan Wolpers
with Andreea Tomoiaga



+5

new questions!



AGE of PRODUCT

INVENT FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS



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Introduction

42 questions to identify the best candidate for your organization

Plus 5 new questions in this second edition

With more than 11,000 downloads of the first publication in our Agile Imposters series, [38 Scrum Master Interview Questions to Avoid Hiring Agile Imposters](#) (now in its fourth edition), and the continuing demand for it, we've confirmed that it's critical to hire people with an agile mindset for an agile team to succeed.



38 Scrum Master Interview Questions to Avoid Hiring Agile Imposters

The first publication in our Agile Imposters series, 38 Scrum Master Interview Questions to Avoid Hiring Agile Imposters, now in its fourth edition, provides the interview questions you need to identify the right candidate for the role of scrum master in your organization.

[Download the 93 page ebook for free](#)

This second publication in the Agile Imposters series is therefore focused on hiring for another critical scrum¹ role: that of **product owner**.

Co-authored with Andreea Tomoiaga, [42 Product Owner Interview Questions to Avoid Hiring Agile Imposters](#) represents the most important learnings of our more than twenty years combined hands-on experience with kanban², scrum, XP³, and several product discovery frameworks. We have worked as product owners, scrum

1. This text assumes a familiarity with what scrum is. If you're unfamiliar with agile software development frameworks, and scrum in particular, [read the Wikipedia entry here](#).
2. [Unlike scrum](#), [kanban](#) is not a framework but a methodology, and much less structured than scrum. Often used together with scrum, kanban introduces the concept of a 'kanban board' to provide a system for introducing change through incremental improvement.
3. XP ([Extreme Programming](#)) is a lightweight software development methodology.

masters, agile coaches, and developers in agile teams and organizations of all sizes and levels of maturity. We have each participated in interviewing dozens of product owner candidates on behalf of our clients and employers. The questions and answers herein are what we have learned.

Scrum's product owner role is tricky to grasp

Scrum is not a methodology, but a framework. There are no rules that apply to each and every scenario — just best practices that have worked in other organizations before. As somebody hiring for an agile team, you need to determine for yourself what works for your organization — which is a process, not a destination.

The role of the product owner itself makes the hiring process difficult to handle. The product owner is the least well defined role within the scrum framework and — at the same time — the role with the most facets.

Product owners are innovators at heart and thus value creators for both their customers and their organizations — if given the chance to work in an agile manner. Theirs is the most vulnerable scrum role. Turn a product owner into a (ticket-system of your choice) monkey, or deprive them of the ability to say “No” (by making someone else the gatekeeper of the product backlog), and they quickly become the Achilles' heel of any agile organization.

The product owner role depends upon the size of the organization, the industry it operates in, and the lifecycle stage of it's products. But most importantly, overlap with the product manager role must be considered (spoiler: they aren't identical).

These 42 interview questions are neither suited nor intended to turn an inexperienced interviewer into an expert on agile software development. But in the hands of a seasoned practitioner these questions will provide ample support when needing to determine who of the candidates has actually worked successfully in the agile trenches. Remember: “agile” is a mindset, not a methodology. There is no checklist that will drive your recruiting success.

[42 Product Owner Interview Questions to Avoid Hiring Agile Imposters](#) provides contextual information including guidance on suitable answers and instruction as to how these interview questions are best used. The questions are grouped into six sets that cover the most important work areas.

The role of a product owner

Background

This first set addresses a candidate's conceptual understanding of the product owner's role in the scrum process:

- A product owner embraces, shares, and communicates the product vision. They represent both the customer and internal stakeholders.
- With respect to process, a product owner is the gatekeeper of the product backlog, and thus "owns" the product on behalf of the organization.
- A product owner is responsible for maximizing the value that the product provides to both customers and the organization.

- In order to maximize the value of a product, the product owner must be empowered to make all product-related decisions on behalf of the organization.
- If a product **owner** is not empowered to “**own**” the product, they are not a product owner per se, and the organization is not practicing scrum.
- A product owner is the sole representative of the stakeholders, internal and external, insofar as the development team is concerned.
- A product owner owns the “**why**”, and influences the “**who**” and “**what**”, but should never be concerned with the “**how**”. Progress in product development is always a collaborative, team effort.
- A product owner must work closely with the core scrum team⁴, and particularly the scrum master or agile coach — their natural ally.
- A product owner should actively participate in scrum ceremonies, especially the product backlog refinement, sprint planning, and sprint acceptance ceremonies.

4. Typically a software development team, a scrum team comprises a scrum master, product owner, and less than 10 members who are cross-functional and can do the work necessary to create a product increment.

- A product owner needs to be co-located with the scrum team in order to avoid delays, communication errors, and other problems caused by distance.
- Contrary to popular belief, a product owner is neither a user story author nor a requirements engineer, but rather a communicator and facilitator between the stakeholders and the scrum team.

Question 01

What's the purpose of being agile in the first place?

As stated in the [Manifesto for Agile Software Development](#), being agile is primarily about prioritizing adaptability over following a plan. Or, to paraphrase Peter Drucker: it is more about doing the right things, and less about doing the things right⁵. Consequently, with regard to product development, agile is about postponing the decision of making a product investment to the latest economically feasible moment. This is achieved by testing hypotheses as fast and as cheaply as possible, thus mitigating risk and maximizing the value of the product and the development team's work. Being agile means having the courage to stop when the chosen course is no longer viable.

5. Peter Drucker: "[Efficiency is doing things right; effectiveness is doing the right things.](#)"

The product owner role has been dubbed the “bottleneck” and “Achilles’ heel” of scrum; should your candidate mention this, consider it a plus. If, however, your candidate emphasizes the task of creating user stories: question them further, and see if their perspective broadens.

Question 02

How would you characterize your role as a product owner? Are you a facilitator, a coach, a manager, a visionary, a tactician, a coordinator, or a driver?

With this question you are trying to better understand how the candidate perceives the role of a product owner. Despite lacking managerial authority in the traditional sense, the role of a product owner is a leadership role. Consequently, all of the characterizations suggested by this question apply to a product owner.

The product owner role has been dubbed the “bottleneck” and “Achilles’ heel” of scrum; should your candidate mention this, consider it a plus. If, however, your candidate emphasizes the task of creating user stories: question them further, and see if their perspective broadens.

Question 03

To what extent is the product owner a product manager?

There is a fine line between a product manager and a product owner, and the difference depends upon how each role has crystallized within an organization's structure and culture. Usually, irrespective of product management duties, product ownership entails establishing the product vision and strategy, its alignment with the organization's goals and objectives, and managing any internal and external stakeholders throughout the process.

Read more about the differences between product owners and product managers in Roman Pichler's blog post "[Product Owner = Product Manager?](#)".

Question 04

When was the last time you said "No" to a stakeholder?
How did you approach the situation? What was your reason for saying "No"?

The authority to say "No" is a necessary empowerment of product owners, and the ability of your candidate to use it is an essential qualification. Saying "No" is

necessary, for example, to protect the scrum team from stakeholders' pet projects of doubtful value. It's also useful for putting an end to silo thinking and local optimization within an organization.

Product owners create value not just by shipping the right product, but also by maximizing the amount of work deliberately not done. Because this is what they do, an organization needs to respect a "No" from them. If a product owner's "No" is ignored or overridden, he or she will not be able to fulfill their role: maximizing the value of the product across the organization. Applying "scrum" without an empowered product owner in fact creates a kind of "Waterfall⁶ 2.0" process in that it favours executing a plan over adapting to change.

Ultimately, a product owner's level of control or influence over the product backlog acts as a litmus test of the organization's adoption of agile principles. If the product owner can't say "No", they don't have control, and the organization can't be agile.

6. A waterfall process is a sequential design process that generally adheres to the [waterfall model](#) traditionally used in software development.

Question 05

Your product backlog is guarded by a “product committee” who meet regularly to approve new features. Can you act as a credible product owner if you’re not in control of the product backlog?

If a committee, council, or anybody in management who is not the product owner exercises control over the product backlog, the product owner becomes nothing but a proxy. Probably, the product owner in this case is more a product manager that happens to work with an agile team employing a subset of scrum. It may work fine if aligned with the nature of the organization, its culture, and the product — but it cannot be called “scrum”.

Question 06

What titles would you think suitable on your business card when you think of your role as a product owner?

Good titles include or should be similar to: CEO of Product, Entrepreneur or Intrapreneur, Innovator, Product Visionary, Servant Leader, Single Wringable Neck, Strategic Thinker, Systems Thinker.

Question 07

How do you cooperate with the scrum team?

A product owner should cooperate with the scrum team early, often, and in a respectful and transparent manner. The product owner should be available to the scrum team on a regular basis, and respond to members' queries with adequate speed.

Product discovery and external stakeholders

Background

The questions in this set concern what's required of the product owner with respect to product discovery and product management:

- A product owner must have a holistic understanding of problems and opportunities: in the market, inherent to the product itself, with the organization and its strategy, and of concern to the various stakeholders.
- The job of a product owner is to create value for both customers and the organization while mitigating risk.
- A product owner creates value by embracing a continuous product discovery process built around learning and experimentation.

- During the product discovery process, a product owner validates hypotheses by continuously running experiments.
- Frameworks and methodologies suitable for the product discovery process include [A/B testing](#), [Business Model Canvas](#), [Continuous User Testing](#), [Design Sprints](#), [Design Thinking](#), [Lean Startup](#), [Lean UX](#), and [Rapid Prototyping](#) — to name just a few.
- A product owner must be capable of thinking in terms of systems to deal with complexity.
- The earlier a product owner is involved in a product's lifecycle, the more valuable that product owner will be to the organization.

Question 08

Do you think scrum adequately addresses the product discovery process?

[Design Thinking](#), [Lean Startup](#), [Lean UX](#), and [Service Design](#) are agile methodologies much better suited to product discovery than scrum. Scrum only defines a product owner as the sole gatekeeper of the product backlog: the one person who knows what is most valuable at any given time. Scrum doesn't elaborate on how the product owner gains this insight.

Question 09

How do you learn about new ideas and requirements?

To answer this question the candidate should describe their ideal product discovery process — from idea through hypothesis and experimentation to (preferably) validation.

There are various ways to come up with product ideas. Common approaches include analyzing market needs, industry trends, your own data (e.g. analytics, NPS⁷), and what the competition is doing. Regular brainstorming sessions between stakeholders (e.g. from sales or customer care) and the scrum team tend to be fruitful. Allowing members of the scrum team to spend part of their time on new ideas is a powerful practice (think Gmail). Observing customers by running continuous user tests is yet another, effective approach.

7. NPS® ([Net Promoter Score](#)) is a customer loyalty metric and registered trademark of Fred Reichheld, Bain & Company, and Satmetrix Systems.

Question 10

How do you include user research in the product discovery process?

User research — or better, user testing — should be a continuous exercise in any product-driven organization. It's a vital part of agile's build, test, learn cycle. Practically, this means that communicating with UX⁸ designers and researchers is an integral part of what the product owner and scrum team do (ideally the UX designers and researchers are themselves a part of the team); and that the product owner must continuously gather customer feedback by running frequent user interviews and observing product usage.

These approaches to user testing also apply to technical projects, such as API⁹.

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8. UX, or [user experience design](#), is a design practice that focuses on optimizing products for user satisfaction by designing with consideration for all perceivable aspects. UX encompasses all human-software interfaces, including visual.
 9. [Application Programming Interfaces](#)

Question 11

How much time do you allocate to user research and understanding your customers' needs?

If your candidate says that they spend 50% of their time on user research — great! However, if a product owner were to spend less than 10% of their time on user research, and if no one else was handling product discovery on behalf of the product owner, then the product discovery process needs to be improved. One way to achieve this would be by relieving the product owner of administrative tasks such as user story writing (a product owner is not primarily a user story author).

Question 12

How would you design a process to handle product ideas from stakeholders — and the organization generally?

It's usually a good idea to have a process that actively involves stakeholders and members of the organization in product discovery. People like to have a purpose, and to be a part of something larger than themselves. Providing everyone in the organization an opportunity to contribute, without regard to rank, makes working as

a product owner easier. Such a process doesn't require fancy technology — a simple shared spreadsheet or form is enough to get it started.

Initially, a template to suggest new product features could consist of questions that address the **why**, the **how**, the **what**, and the **for whom**. It could address the tactical or strategic nature of the suggestion, a possible time-frame, or an estimate of the expected return on investment.

Most importantly, designing a process to handle product ideas should be kept agile: the process should start with a simple solution, and then be improved once initial feedback from stakeholders on the process has been analyzed.

Question 13

At what stage do you involve the scrum team in the product discovery process?

You should involve a scrum team as early as possible in the product discovery process. There are primarily three reasons to do so:

- 01 The sooner engineers participate in the product discovery process, the lesser the chances solutions will be pursued that are technically not viable or would not result in a return on investment.

- 02 Involving a scrum team early on ensures that the team and its product owner develop a shared understanding and ownership of what will be built. This helps significantly with allocating resources to the right issues, maximizing value for the customer, and mitigating investment risk.
- 03 Involving a scrum team's engineers early in the process ensures their buy-in, and the team's willingness to participate in all phases of a product's development. This motivates the team to participate when making changes necessary to accomplish the goals defined for each sprint or product release.

Question 14

How do you avoid misallocating resources to features or products that no one is really interested in?

Product owners can avoid misallocating resources by making a firm decision the moment it becomes clear that a product or feature is either not valuable or not feasible. This means that a continuous monitoring process, for example through regular user tests, needs to be established. Once agile's **build, test, learn** cycle proves that an idea or product is unlikely to succeed, the resource allocation needs to stop.

Product owners must not allow the **sunk cost fallacy** to cloud their judgement. No

matter how much has been spent, past expenditure does not justify continued work on a product unlikely to succeed.

Internal stakeholder management

Background

The questions in this set concern specific aspects of the relationships between product owners and their internal stakeholders:

- A product owner needs to gain the trust and mandate of all internal stakeholders.
- A product owner must be able to explain to any internal stakeholder at any time how the stakeholder's requirements are accommodated by the product vision.
- Regular feedback from internal stakeholders is crucial to a product owner's work being successful — specifically their success with creating the hypotheses funnel that they use to run experiments.

- Close cooperation between a product owner and their organization's customer care and sales teams is particularly beneficial for product success.
- A product owner must be empowered by the organization to say "No" to a stakeholder's requests — no matter how powerful the stakeholder is.
- A product owner's communication with internal stakeholders needs to be transparent and regular to encourage these stakeholders to be engaged with the scrum team.
- The scrum master is a good ally for a product owner in the pursuit of internal stakeholder engagement.
- Good opportunities for a product owner to engage internal stakeholders are scrum ceremonies, like the sprint acceptance (demo); workshops, such as user story mappings; or training sessions, whereby stakeholders are taught how to better communicate with the scrum team.
- Internal stakeholders make excellent members of customer development or user research teams, and a product owner should seek to secure their participation in these activities.

Question 15

Your organization has recently decided to 'go agile' in product development. How do you educate your stakeholders about the implications?

A good starting point for educating stakeholders about the implications of going agile would be to hold a training seminar explaining how best to apply the four principles of the [Manifesto for Agile Software Development](#). A product owner needs to ensure their stakeholders acknowledge that adapting to change versus following a plan is critical to the success of their organization.

Stakeholders need to understand that, once they've gone agile, issuing "requirements" (and thus localized optimization efforts) are no longer a valid form of the product delivery process. Instead, **iterative** product discovery and development becomes the guiding principle, elevating experiment and failure to standard practices.

Going agile means to compete with other (probably more valuable) product ideas for scarce resources, and accepting that the product owner is the sole gatekeeper to the product backlog. It means that there are no more delivery dates, but delivery intervals established by the product delivery organization in general, and the individual scrum teams in particular, according to whatever knowledge the organization has at the time. It means keeping in mind that what's known may change at any time, and that these changes will probably affect delivery intervals.

The magnitude of abandoning a command and control management style, and what it means to empower autonomous and self-organizing teams for product delivery, needs to be understood by stakeholders before they commit to going agile. It's the product owner's responsibility to educate them.

Question 16

How do you organize a scrum team's collaboration with stakeholders — and improve it over time?

There are various ways to establish and improve a scrum team's collaboration with stakeholders over time:

- A product owner could institute regular meetings with each stakeholder, or have stakeholders name product ambassadors who then act as “liaison officers” after having been properly trained in the team's agile processes.
- Workshops could be arranged with stakeholders or their ambassadors, ideally with the help of the scrum master or agile coach. Teaming up with user experience experts to run, for example, user journey or user story mapping workshops, is a good approach.
- Stakeholders could be invited to refinement sessions to explain the value of a user story to the scrum team.

Sprint reviews and demos, release demos, and user interviews are also good venues for improving collaboration between the scrum team and stakeholders. But, however collaboration is sought, communication and transparency are key.

Question 17

How do you deal with uncooperative stakeholders?

An often successful way of dealing with uncooperative stakeholders is to win them over by demonstrating the value of agile product development.

Early in the transition to agile, we advise educating stakeholders on agile principles with product-related workshops. Good examples of the topics these workshops could focus on include user story mapping and product roadmap planning. We recommend securing the help of an experienced agile coach at this stage.

It's helpful to establish a schedule for communicating progress with stakeholders. A good way to do this is by holding regular meetings. Also, educating members of stakeholder teams to act as "liaison officers" significantly improves cooperation by mitigating stakeholders' very normal feeling of losing control.

At a later stage in the transition to agile, typical ceremonies such as sprint or release demos also work well to demonstrate value delivered.

Winning over uncooperative stakeholders is a process that will take time. There are no shortcuts. If all else fails, the product owner should seek the support of a C-level sponsor.

Read more about stakeholder communication in [10 Proven Stakeholder Communication Tactics during an Agile Transition](#).

Question 18

A new feature is overdue and has been drastically underestimated because of unexpected technical debt. Nevertheless, your most important stakeholder insists on 'finishing it' because so much effort has already been invested. How do you deal with this?

Adhering to agile principles requires adapting to change over following a plan. If a project is late, it may have already lost its original value to the organization and its customers. Reevaluating the project's value prior to dedicating more resources to it is a necessity. If the project will still deliver value, the product owner and their team should probably go for it — keeping in mind, however, that other investment opportunities in the product backlog will be competing for their attention.

Stakeholders who insist on “finishing it” because of prior investment have fallen for the sunk cost fallacy. Product owners never should.

Question 19

How do you deal with pet projects?

Product owners should submit stakeholders' pet projects to the usual, standardized process that every product idea must be put through. Continually updating the business case for each of these projects forces them to compete with more valuable projects. Sooner or later, common sense ends such a misallocation of resources, as pet projects rarely provide a return on investment.

For product owners dealing with pet projects, the stakeholders with more valuable projects make good allies in this conflict.

Question 20

The sales department often sells new features to close deals without talking to you first. How do you deal with that?

If a sales department is selling new features without talking to the product development team, their attitude is probably encouraged by management in pursuit of meeting sales targets. It reflects a non-agile, opportunistic mindset that values instant gratification — more sales — over a sustainable product development

strategy. To change this mindset, it invariably helps to reach out to the sales department and offer them support on the technical side of the sales process as early as possible. Given the usual incentives for the sales team, a real change, however, will only happen if management buy into agile product development principles.

Product roadmap planning

Background

The questions in this set concern one of the most contentious topics in the profession: “How do we build agile product roadmaps that actually work?”

- A product owner’s role requires that they also act as a product manager, which means that they must define the product vision, perform strategy and market research, develop business models, manage the product lifecycle, and facilitate product portfolio and roadmap planning. (For more detail, refer to Roman Pichler’s [The Scrum Product Owner Role on One Page](#).)
- An agile product roadmap is a high-level plan that describes how the product vision is likely to be accomplished. It should facilitate experimentation and learning.

- An agile product roadmap is based on objectives, and is usually theme- or goal-oriented.
- An agile product roadmap is not a prioritized list of features with fixed shipping dates for months to come. (For more detail, refer to our article [7 Best Practices on How to Build a Product Roadmap](#).)
- Usually product roadmap planning in larger organizations with several products requires that each product owner align their efforts with other product owners to synchronize product development.
- A product roadmap addresses strategic aspects of product planning. A product backlog addresses technical development issues.
- Roadmap planning is, like product backlog refinement, a continuous effort — just at an increased cadence.
- Product owners communicate “big product pictures” by using techniques like user story mapping. (For more detail, refer to Jeff Patton’s [User Story Mapping](#).)
- A product owner needs to be familiar with the five levels of agile planning: defining the product vision, defining the product roadmap, release planning, sprint planning, and accounting for the outcome of daily scrums.

- Relying on a committee of stakeholders for product discovery and portfolio management is the most common reason that agile product delivery initiatives fail.

Question 21

Product vision and strategy are kept confidential in your organization to prevent competitors from stealing the ideas. Will that impede your work as a product owner?

Keeping product vision and strategy confidential significantly impedes the work of product owners because innovation is most effective when there is transparency within an organization. Innovation is a team sport; the brilliant innovator working in isolation is a myth. However, a team tasked with innovating can only start once they share an understanding of the product vision and strategy. If there is no transparency within the organization, if the product vision and strategy are kept confidential, a shared understanding is unlikely to develop — and innovation will stall.

Question 22

Aren't product portfolios and roadmaps anachronisms in an agile organization?

Product portfolios and product roadmaps are valuable to agile organizations. These documents define for an agile team the objectives of their organization. Despite creating a plan, they are not anachronistic if treated as living documents as opposed to static directives.

The product development endeavours outlined by a portfolio and roadmap are subject not only to the organization's objectives, but also to their own sustainability from a financial point of view. Any particular endeavour can act as a source of investment for another. Or, all of the endeavours might have a common source of investment. Consequently, the plans created by product portfolios and product roadmaps help structure investment. These documents contribute to better financial management by illustrating the relationships between endeavours and, thus, sources of business value.

Question 23

What is your approach to creating product roadmaps?

Product roadmaps should generally be created top-down, starting with the organization's objectives and product vision. Following several iterations involving both the organization's leadership and internal stakeholders, it's usually beneficial to involve the product development teams themselves in creating a second version of the roadmap that combines the original first draft with a bottom-up perspective. Meeting somewhere in the middle guarantees that important aspects, while probably of a more detailed nature, aren't lost in the process.

Question 24

How often should product roadmap planning be done?

Product roadmap planning is a continuous exercise, requiring that all products are analyzed no matter at what stage in the product lifecycle they're in: under planning, in development, live, or on the brink of being phased-out. These analyses should be performed at least quarterly if not monthly, the frequency depending upon the maturity of the organization, the size of its product portfolio, the kinds of products

and services it provides, and the industries (including levels of regulation) in which the organization participates.

Question 25

How do you connect teams to the product vision — and show them how their contributions bring that vision to life?

The best way to connect a scrum team to their organization's product vision is to include the team actively in the product discovery process. Engineering teams will feel that they've been disrespected if only confronted with requirements documents, and rightfully so: this leaves them with only limited options to become self-organized, unable to influence the product backlog. Being limited in this way leads to the feeling of being a "cog in the machinery", affecting the team members' belief in their autonomy.

There are various ways a product owner can include a scrum team in the product discovery process. Inviting the team to perform user story mapping with other stakeholders, involving the team in product portfolio and product roadmap planning, and encouraging the team's participation in user tests are a few good examples.

Question 26

How do you estimate the costs and benefits of epics, tasks, or features in the product backlog to allow for prioritization?

Product backlogs and product roadmaps need to be prioritized according to the costs and benefits of the epics, tasks, or features thereby planned. Estimating the benefits of the epics, tasks, or features in the product backlog or product roadmap can be done by playing business value poker¹⁰ with stakeholders. But this only addresses one side of the equation. It's also necessary to estimate development costs so that backlog items can be prioritized — and estimating development costs is the prerogative of the scrum team.

It is an integral part of a product owner's role to participate in both estimation processes, and to facilitate the alignment of the values arising from both in order to prioritize a product backlog or product roadmap.

10. Also referred to as "priority poker", business value poker involves stakeholders using game cards to set priorities for requirements, specifications, user stories, use cases, change requests, risks, test cases, or bugs. Each of the cards corresponds to one of these items to be prioritized, information about which is distributed before the game. A moderator who doesn't play the game themselves is tasked with ensuring the game successfully concludes. For more detail, refer to the "Priority Poker" slide deck [published by SwissQ on SlideShare](#).

The product backlog and user story creation

Background

The questions in this set concern a product owner's home turf: the product backlog, and user story creation.

The product backlog

- A product owner is much more than the “project manager of the product backlog”, and must do more than churning out user stories on behalf of stakeholders (a.k.a. “ticket monkey syndrome”).
- Product backlog refinement is a continuous process that needs to be in sync with the product discovery process.

- Typically, a scrum team will collaboratively refine product backlog items for the upcoming two or three sprints.

User story creation

- Creating user stories does not equal breaking down requirements documents received from stakeholders into smaller chunks.
- Writing user stories is a collaborative effort involving the entire scrum team. The process should create a shared understanding of what will be built, and for what reasons.
- Because it's a collaborative effort, a user story is a subject of discussion for the scrum team. This might take up to 10% of the team's availability during a sprint.
- A product owner will need to come to an agreement with their team as to what standards user stories need to achieve before being considered suitable for the sprint backlog (i.e. defining and achieving the **definition of ready**¹¹).
- Planning poker — the process of estimating user stories — is, most importantly,

11. A 'definition of ready' is an agreement between the scrum team and the product owner about what must be included in a user story (before the story can be considered ready for estimation). It defines what a good user story looks like.

knowledge transfer. It supports the creation of a shared understanding within the scrum team of what needs to be built.

- User story estimation is a critical part of the risk mitigation strategy for the scrum team.
- With respect to the definition of ready: a candidate for the role of product owner should have heard of Bill Wake's INVEST acronym (from the article [INVEST in Good Stories and SMART Tasks](#)).

Question 27

What's the idea behind product backlog refinement?

Product backlog refinement emerged as a best practice out of the original Sprint Planning 1 ceremony. It was discovered that regularly working on the product backlog (with the whole team) as opposed to working on it just once every sprint (as part of sprint planning) was more effective. This is because the idea behind backlog refinement is to create a shared understanding amongst everyone who's part of a scrum team: about why each user story being accommodated by the team is valuable, and about how each of these stories will be realized technically.

Question 28

How would you organize the process of refining the product backlog?

The refinement process should be structured around questions such as

- What user stories are no longer relevant?
- What user stories need to be split?
- What user stories can be updated with new information?
- Does this update change previous estimations?
- Has the priority of a specific user story changed?
- Do we have any new or relevant topics that haven't yet been considered — for example, refactoring tasks that the scrum team wants to address?

If during the process it's discovered that there are new or relevant topics that haven't yet been considered, these topics would need to be captured as new user stories.

Question 29

How many user stories can you work on in parallel while ensuring their continued relevance to customers and the organization?

The number of user stories that can be worked on in parallel depends upon the balance maintained by a product owner between stakeholder communication, customer research, and the product owner's commitment to their own scrum team. Working on more user stories than the team can handle in two or three sprints might, however, prove to be difficult. Often, if a product owner cannot allocate sufficient time to a single user story, they are wasting resources on half-baked stories of questionable value.

Question 30

At what stage do you include other team members in the refinement process?

A product owner should only include other members of the scrum team in user story refinement when the user story is ready to be refined. This is typically when there aren't further changes to the plot of the story. However, it is often difficult

to determine when a user story is ready to be refined because its readiness also depends upon the nature of the product, the experience of the team, and both the readiness and the availability of the team to contribute (often influenced by how the organization is managed).

To create a shared understanding of the **why**, **what**, and **how** of a user story among the members of a scrum team, choosing the right moment for their involvement is critical. If the team is involved too early, the engineers may consider their involvement a waste of their time. If the team is involved too late — for example, if all of the specifications have already been prepared — they may feel that their expertise is not being respected.

If with any user story the product owner is in doubt about when to involve the scrum team in the story's refinement, they should include the scrum master in making the decision.

Question 31

How do you handle bugs and technical debt when there are a lot of valuable new features competing for resources?

When valuable new features are competing with bugs and technical debt in a product backlog, a product owner should consistently address, with every sprint, a limited number of the most important bugs and the most pressing issues caused

by technical debt. Focusing solely on shipping new features is a slippery slope that quickly leads to a build-up of technical debt. Increased technical debt quickly leads to engineers becoming frustrated.

A good rule of thumb is to allocate 10% of your resources to bugs, 15% to technical debt, and the remainder to new features. It is sometimes beneficial to allocate 5% of your resources to running investigative spikes in order to learn more about technical issues prior to creating a user story. However, this is a rule of thumb, and a product owner's quantification might need to be different in order to accommodate other factors pertinent to the product, the scrum team, or the organization at the time.

Question 32

What should a good user story look like? What is its structure?

A good user story

- 01 includes a description,
- 02 has acceptance criteria defined,
- 03 can be delivered within a sprint,
- 04 has all UI ¹² deliverables available,
- 05 has all (probable) dependencies identified,
- 06 has performance criteria defined,

- 07 has tracking criteria defined, and
- 08 is estimated by the team.

This list can serve as a definition of ready for user stories. Another useful set of criteria for a definition of ready is [the INVEST principle](#) by Bill Wake.

Question 33

What are the most common pitfalls of product backlog refinement?

The most common pitfalls of product backlog refinement are

- 01 not enough refinement sessions, resulting in a low quality backlog;
- 02 too many refinement sessions, resulting in a too detailed backlog;
- 03 turning requirements documents received from stakeholders into user stories without involving the scrum team;
- 04 not involving the entire scrum team in the refinement process, and instead relying on just the “lead engineer” (or any other member of the team independently of the others);

-
- 12. UI, or [user interface design](#), is the predominantly visual presentation and interactivity of a software product, and the design practice concerned with this.

- 05 not involving stakeholders in the refinement process; and
- 06 thinking of backlog refinement as too expensive (despite the fact that it should not usually require more than 10% of the team's time).

Question 34

When would you remove a product feature?

The best way to remove useless features from a product is to not build them into it in the first place. Simplicity and a radical focus on what constitutes the value delivered to customers are key to the success of any agile product organization.

Simplicity and focus can't be achieved without removing features. New features of lesser value that slip into the product backlog and are delivered — despite validation efforts during product discovery — should be removed from the live product as soon as possible. Existing features that have outlived their usefulness should likewise be removed as soon as possible.

Sprint planning, reviews, and retrospectives

Background

The questions in this final set concern product delivery: the sprint itself.

- A product owner defines the scope of upcoming sprints by identifying and prioritizing the most valuable user stories in the product backlog.
- A product owner should participate in all scrum ceremonies related to sprints.
- The product owner is the person responsible for defining a sprint's goal.
- A product owner understands that, in addition to user stories, technical tasks, bugs, and research need to be addressed in every sprint. (For more detail, refer to Barry Overeem's [The Backlog Prioritisation Quadrant](#).)

- A product owner should be available on short notice to clarify any questions that the scrum team may have during a sprint.
- A product owner is responsible for accepting user stories into each sprint, and for deferring user stories that require additional work to meet the scrum team's definition of ready standard. This does not apply to user stories that are related to technical or refactoring tasks. The decision on those is the prerogative of the scrum team.
- A product owner is responsible for deciding whether to release a product increment at the end of each sprint.
- A product owner should host the sprint review, which is an event meant to provide the scrum team an opportunity to demo the outcome of each sprint to the product's stakeholders.
- A product owner must embrace the sprint review as a vital "inspect and adapt" feedback loop — for both the development team and the product's external and internal stakeholders.

Question 35

How do you ensure the scrum team will be working on the most valuable user stories?

A product owner will normally be able to ensure that the scrum team is working on the most valuable user stories by prioritizing the sprint backlog. This predefines the potential scope of each sprint — valuable, because every sprint is supposed to deliver a best possible return on investment.

However, trade-offs common to the project management era still apply: time, budget, scope, quality. If a product owner is in doubt about the value of a user story, they only needn't pick that story, and the team's efforts won't be wasted. Often, a product owner need only ask themselves: "Would you spend your own money on this feature?".

Question 36

Is it necessary for the product owner to set the goal for a sprint?

One of the product owner's most important tasks in preparing for a sprint is to

define the sprint's objective. If no objective is defined, the scrum team is only practicing Kanban.

Question 37

You are pushing for an important user story to be selected for the next sprint. Unfortunately, the final user interface designs are missing — but the designers promise to deliver no more than two days into the sprint. Despite this, the scrum master rejects the story because the definition of ready has not been met. What can you do?

Selecting a user story that hasn't met a scrum team's definition of ready is a negotiation between the product owner and the team. Whether the story is selected depends upon the team's present concerns and experience with the circumstances that caused the story to not meet their definition of ready. In the case of an incomplete or missing user interface design, for example, if the design team is almost certain to deliver because they have done so in the past, and if the user story is of a very high value, and if the story can be accomplished within the sprint despite its UI deliverables arriving late, and if the team agrees to it... it's probably an acceptable exception. However, it is the scrum team who should decide to select the user story in such a case — not the product owner.

Question 38

Should a product owner attend the entire sprint planning ceremony?

The sprint planning ceremony is usually split into two parts.

Sprint planning 1

During the first part of the sprint planning ceremony, a product owner presents to the scrum team the product owner's choice of the most valuable user stories from the product backlog. The team then selects from the top of the list down those stories it can commit to delivering by the end of the sprint — taking into consideration their present constraints including, for example, available capacity or the required technical tasks that need to be addressed in the same sprint. The presence of the product owner during this part of the sprint planning ceremony is essential.

Sprint planning 2

During the second part of the sprint planning ceremony, the scrum team adds detail to the user stories in the sprint backlog (e.g. splitting the stories into tasks, identifying parts of the stories that need further clarification, and agreeing on who will be working on what tasks). The product owner does not necessarily need

to participate in this part of the sprint planning ceremony, but does need to be available to answer questions that the team may have.

Question 39

Your scrum team regularly estimate user stories at the upper end of the possible range. You believe they're playing safe, creating buffers for rainy days. How do you address this?

A scrum team consistently estimating user stories at the upper end of the possible range is problematic. A scrum team needs to trust the scrum process.

A lack of trust in the scrum process might be rooted in the culture of the organization, in negative experiences with an organization's prior attempts at applying agile practices, or in the quality of the user stories previously worked on. A team might be too junior to fully understand the implications of some user stories, or their current project might be suffering from technical debt — either issue making estimates more volatile and, consequently, the team less trusting.

A candidate for the role of product owner should be able to identify a lack of trust in the scrum process as a reason for a scrum team to provide consistently high estimates. They should also be able to identify the issues likely to cause a lack of trust, and should be able to suggest solutions that, implemented with the help of

the scrum master, would encourage the scrum team to once again trust the scrum process — and their own realistic estimates.

Question 40

A stakeholder tends to broaden the scope of a user story in retrospect, and frequently claims the scrum team did not deliver what was requested. How do you deal with that?

Stakeholders sneaking features into a user story following its selection is a common anti-pattern. A stakeholder who broadens the scope of a user story in retrospect and then claims the scrum team did not deliver is behaving in a way that threatens the scrum process. Such claims will rightfully lead to discussion between the product owner, scrum team, and scrum master — it's a product owner's responsibility to clearly understand the scope of a user story in advance. Consequently, when stakeholders threaten the scrum process in this way, a product owner will need to support the scrum team.

Question 41

When do you accept user stories?

A product owner should accept user stories during a sprint, and each story as soon as its acceptance criteria are met and the team or the engineers involved consider the story done.

Question 42

How do you reject user stories?

A product owner may reject user stories simply by saying “No” during the acceptance session — if the story’s acceptance criteria were not met. In the case of a rejection, a product owner should want to learn why the acceptance criteria were not met, and what measures could be taken to prevent the failure from recurring. (One way to develop measures for counteracting these types of failure is to hold a brief post mortem during the next retrospective to discuss the issue and its potential solutions.)

Question 43

Does a product owner have veto over the release of user stories?

A product owner is the only person with the authority to release product increments to all or a subset of customers (except for technical tasks, the release of which are the responsibility of the engineers). This includes the ability to veto the release of any increment.

Question 44

How would you organize a sprint review?

Everybody should attend a sprint review: internal stakeholders, external stakeholders, and the entire scrum team — including the product owner. It's not the product owner's task, however, to organize the sprint review — despite the fact that the scrum team is supposed to use the sprint review to present the outcome of the sprint to the stakeholders. Instead, the product owner and the scrum team should organize every sprint review together, and strive to make each a worthwhile ceremony for all attendees.

The feedback provided by the stakeholders at a sprint review is essential for every member of the scrum team to improve their work. The occasion of a sprint review is also the best time to inspect and adapt the product backlog.

Not inviting either internal or external stakeholders to a sprint review is a common anti-pattern, as is not inviting members of the scrum team who claim to have more important things to do. Everybody should attend a sprint review.

Question 45

During a sprint review, the development team demos new functionality you've never seen before. How do you react?

A scrum team should never work on user stories from the product backlog that the product owner has not sanctioned for the current sprint. A scrum team using a sprint review to demo functionality that the product owner and stakeholders did not expect to see is an anti-pattern — and not conducive to a successful sprint review.

A scrum team bypassing the product owner by independently selecting user stories from the product backlog shows a significant deficit in the team's understanding of scrum basics. A product owner should immediately address occurrences of such behaviour with the team, preferably in concert with the scrum master.

A scrum team bypassing the product owner also shows that the product owner

probably wasn't participating in all of the standups, and should consider accepting (or accepting more) user stories during the sprint — as soon as the development team considers them done.

Question 46

A stakeholder insists on 'driving' themselves instead of watching the demo. Are you okay with that?

There is no requirement that a member of the scrum team demo new features during a sprint review. A stakeholder, or anyone else, can easily perform this function.

Question 47

At the end of a sprint, do you participate in the retrospective?

It's best that the product owner is always invited to retrospectives — they are a part of the scrum team. Some teams, though, don't want the product owner to participate in retrospectives because of a perceived or actual conflict between

themselves and the product owner. In such a case, the product owner should address the issue with the scrum master and find a solution together with the team.

Conclusion

How to use these interview questions

Scrum has always been a pragmatic business, and to succeed in this business a candidate needs to have a passion for getting their hands dirty. Although the basic rules are trivial, getting a group of individuals with different backgrounds, levels of engagement, and personal agendas to continuously deliver value by creating a great product is a complex task. And the larger the organization is — the more levels of management there are — the more likely failure, in one of its many forms, is lurking around the corner.

These interview questions are neither suited nor intended to turn an inexperienced interviewer into an expert on agile software development. But in the hands of a seasoned practitioner these questions will provide ample support when needing to determine who of the candidates has actually worked successfully in the agile trenches. They'll also help you determine who's most likely to be an imposter.

You want to avoid inviting imposters for a trial. Look for the pragmatic veteran who

has experienced both failure and success with previous projects, and who carries the scars to prove it. Certifications, including the Certified Scrum Product Owner (CSPO)¹³ certification, are by no means an indication that you've got the "right" candidate.

13. CSPO® and Certified Scrum Product Owner® are [registered trademarks](#) of Scrum Alliance, Inc.

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Stefan has worked many years as a product manager, product owner, and agile coach (Scrum, LeSS¹⁴, Lean Startup, Lean Change). He's founded multiple companies, and has led the development of B2C and B2B software, primarily for startups, but also for other organizations — including a former Google subsidiary. He is a steward of the [XSCALE Alliance](#) and an XBA Exponential Business Agility Coach (XBAC).

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14. LeSS ([Large-Scale Scrum](#)) is a product development framework that extends scrum with scaling rules and guidelines.

continued his education in business administration and law. Following school he discovered a passion for software and, in 1996, launched the first online ecommerce platform to feature SAP R/3 connectivity — only to learn that the early bird does not necessarily catch the worm. After moving from his home town of Hamburg to Berlin, Germany, he created Susuh GmbH, a marketplace for local services. Other ventures followed, and in 2011 he founded [Startup Camp Berlin](#) — one of the largest German startup conferences today.

Stefan's latest project, [Age of Product](#), focuses on the exchange of knowledge between the people involved in product development: product managers, product owners, scrum masters, designers, and developers. The goal is to help those involved in product development with lessons learned and best practices for continuous agile product discovery and delivery.

Read more about Stefan at [LeSS Works](#) or [Scrum Alliance](#), and connect with him via [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter](#), or privately via [email](#).



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Andreea is a product manager who is passionate about designing and optimizing B2B integrations. She is keenly interested in strategy and prioritization techniques, and uses agile principles to build and grow motivated teams that deliver products successfully — whether working locally or around the globe.

Throughout her career Andreea has worked in many different roles — from developer through architect, project manager through product manager — successfully delivering projects of different sizes by combining a variety of managerial methods. She sees the combination of methods in the right balance and at appropriate moments as an important key to product success.

Andreea is a [Certified ScrumMaster®](#) and [PRINCE2®](#) Practitioner. She likes to write about various product and project management topics on [her personal website](#).

Read more about Andreea at [Scrum Alliance](#), and connect with her via [LinkedIn](#).

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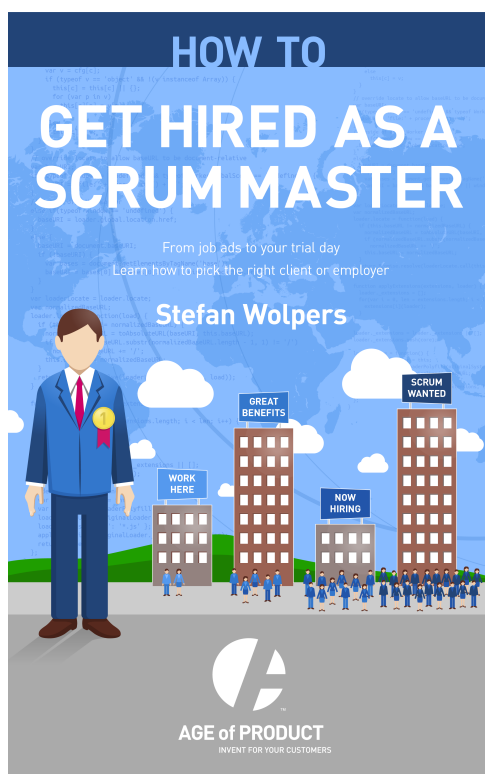
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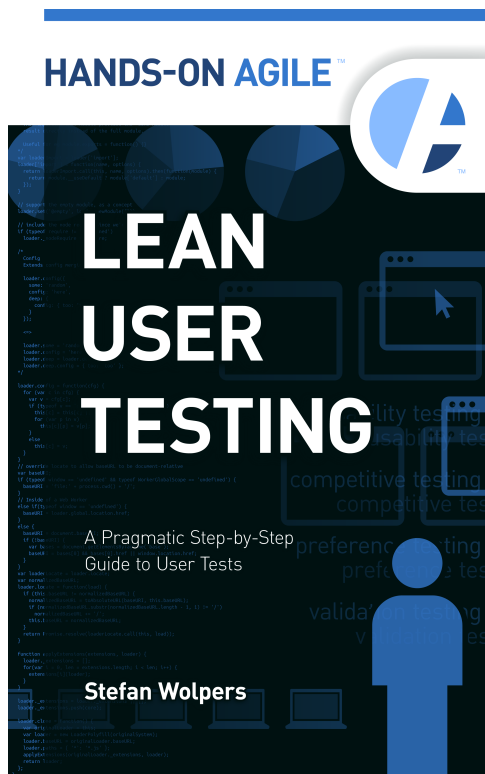
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