

Why Product Officer Searches Go Wrong

The hiring pitfalls to avoid

By Anna Auerbach



The search for the right Chief Product Officer is rarely straightforward. Even when you think you've made the right choice, the match may prove to be unsuccessful if the new head of product doesn't mesh with your culture. We call this organ rejection. It was a match doomed from the start.

The CPO search is fraught because the new hires are not set up for success. Often there is an understanding gap between the practitioners of the function and the businesses that hire them. Bridging that gap is the key to a successful CPO.

When CPO searches go wrong, there are two major reasons why:

You're using an outdated definition of the word "product."

Product is a word that has evolved in important ways. The old definition of product could be synonymous with widget. A product was what you made. In that universe, a Chief Product Officer was in charge of getting product to market – a widget shipper. A critical job, to be sure. But essentially, uncomplicated.

Silicon Valley changed that.

In software, the word "product" has taken on a new and far more nuanced meaning. In a software company, the product is not a widget; the product is the company. But this isn't just about software. Today, every company must be a tech company, and every company needs to figure out how to navigate their own journey of what product means to them.

- A CPO is a customer advocate: The CPO is the function that acts a bridge between what technology can create and what customers truly need. Within the walls of a company, the CPO is the voice of the customer, connecting human needs with technological possibilities.
- A CPO is an experience creator: If you've been trained to think of "product" as an object, the new CPO will set you straight. The CPO isn't focused simply on a sale, but on creating an experience for the customer. This can be everything from the features of the product itself to the experience of buying and owning it.
- A CPO is a reality check: Is the product in development commercially viable? It's the CPO's job to voice this throughout the process.

A key challenge is that there's sometimes a disconnect between the role the product officer needs to play within a company, and the role leadership has in mind. Leaders may lack clarity on what exactly the product officer should focus on, leading to confusion and often disappointment for everyone.

You're looking for your CPO in the wrong places.

Another reason your CPO search is difficult may stem from where you're looking. A great product leader may not have a product title today. That individual may be

working under related titles, such as data, marketing, engineering, or digital. Here's an example: We helped an information services company on their CPO search. Since their product is data and information, they were originally looking for a data product leader. After a number of interviews with potential candidates, they realized that the real opportunity in their business wasn't simply the data product but the goal of tapping into the customer value opportunity. In the end, they hired someone out of a General Manager role. That individual could bridge the data product with the commercial opportunity.

You may even need to look outside your industry. Think creatively about the adjacencies and parallels to your business. Sometimes the right expertise is in an adjacency but one that has similar dynamics. For example, we helped a company find a product leader for a dating business. If we only search from other dating sites, the pool of candidates would be quite small. Instead, we encouraged the client to broaden the search to adjacent industries – in this case, gaming. If you think about it, ultimately the digital experience of gaming and dating have tremendous parallels. The final hire came from the gaming space.

What you can do to sharpen your CPO search.

The most successful CPO searches are ones that focus not on titles or industries, but on where the company is in defining what product means to them, coupled with a solid understanding of skills and gaps on the team. The right product leader is a combination of strategy and internal capabilities. Be sure you know the strengths and weaknesses of your product, technology and marketing teams as you go into the search process, because fundamentally, product roles can be fluid, and they are as much a function of how the company thinks about product, as what the existing capabilities are of the team. That's the way you'll be sure to get the right fit for your team.

Also, importantly, a successful CPO search is one that is iterative and flexible. Although theoretically it's possible to perfectly align on what kind of product you need, the team's capabilities and culture, and where to look – this is rarely perfectly defined upfront. In fact, companies often learn the answers to these questions only as they start meeting and assessing candidates. It is as much art as science.

Finally, remember that you are looking for a function that will connect across all elements of your company. Product doesn't exist in a silo. Done right, it is a sister function to all others. Product will depend on close collaboration between Product, Engineering, Marketing and Sales. Its effectiveness requires a company-wide commitment to customer centricity, rapid iteration and willingness to leverage technology to maximize operational efficiency and effectiveness to deliver a best-in-class service or product. A successful Chief Product Officer is one that is integrated can see the intersection of what's possible and what's viable today – but where that intersection will lie in the future. That's how great products are born.



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