**How to Hire Great Product Managers**



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I’ve written a lot about interviewing from the candidate’s perspective in [Cracking the PM Interview](https://amzn.to/2SCiBSV), and now I’d like to flip that around and share some of my tips on the other side. Hiring the right people for your team is essential, and it all starts with how you interview.

Here are some of the top things I’ve learned throughout my years both as an interviewer at [Asana](https://asana.com/) and Google, and as a hiring manager at Asana.

Start by agreeing on what you’re looking for in a PM

Product Management is fundamentally a white space role, so the skills you need will depend on what what skills you already have and what your company does.

It’s best to do this with the people who will be working with the PM and interviewing the PM, so that they’ll all be aligned. PMs do best when the team they’re joining really wants them there.

Here are some questions to consider

* Do you want a very senior PM who will drive the processes, strategy and roadmap across a wide scope, or do you want someone earlier in their career who will partner with the founder or another PM?
* Do you need someone with great design taste, really keen business insights, strong analytical skills, visionary strategy, or deep technical expertise? Which of those are most important to your team?
* Do you need someone who can hit the ground running with industry expertise or can you take the time to ramp up a generalist?
* Are there any specific gaps on your team that you’re hoping the PM will fill?
* Are there any soft skills that are especially important for succeeding in your company’s culture (eg. making space for introverts, debating ideas on the fly, passionate about productivity software)?

Consider what can be taught on the job vs. what is hard to teach

A lot of the processes and specific skills of PMing can be taught to someone with the right potential.

It’s easy to teach factual information and tools. Lots of PMs have never worked directly with A/B Testing before, but if they’re strong analytically they can pick it up quickly.

They might not know what a Minimum Viable Product is, but if they’re good with prioritization they can figure out how to scope an MVP after you explain it. It would be silly to reject a candidate because they didn’t know a fact that you could teach them in 10 minutes.

On the other hand, I don’t think mindsets and what types of information you notice can be picked up quickly on the job.

A person could develop these over time if they wanted to, but as a hiring manager I wouldn’t count on them improving quickly if they don’t already have them.

On this list I put: customer empathy, awareness of good design, product intuition, product mindset, learning mindset, perseverance, collaborating well with people, effective communication, detail oriented, and grasping complex concepts quickly.

In the middle are a bunch of skills that can be honed on the job with experience, but they take time and mentorship.

 These are skills where you could read a book to pick up the basic tips, but there are so many nuances and complexities that you won’t be able to figure out which tip to apply until you’ve been through it a few times. Or where it’s easy to learn what you \*should\* do, but it’s scary enough that most people won’t do it until they’ve been burned a few times (like learning to show your work early).

 On this list I put a lot of the PM processes: working with engs and designers in a sprint cadence, writing specs, leading cross functional meetings, and pulling ideas together into a compelling strategy.

If you’ve got experienced PMs eager to mentor, you can build a great team by adding in high potential people who have less PM experience — typically that’s done through hiring new grads, but I think there is a lot of untapped potential in opening roles for people with several years of work experience who want to transition to product management.

Do you need to require a Computer Science degree or MBA?

Some companies like to require a CS degree or MBA, and I’ll admit it’s an easy filtering criteria if your company is overwhelmed with job applicants.

 However, most product management roles don’t really require deep technical knowledge or a business degree.

About half of the PMs at Asana have no technical background, and ALL of them have been quick to learn how to dig into technical issues with their engineering partners.

 Instead of requiring a CS degree, I look for people who respect engineers and are brave enough to ask questions when they don’t understand something.

About a third of the PMs at Asana have an MBA. Many of them say the biggest value they got out of the MBA program was the networking and connections, rather than direct PM skills.

 If you’re a candidate an MBA is a great path to transition from a different career, but I suspect that employers who require an MBA are missing out.

Put together an interview process that tests for all of the skills, experiences, and traits that you’re looking for

When I first started at Asana we let each person pick whichever questions they wanted to ask. We’d often end up realizing after the interviews that we didn’t really know if they had one of the skills we wanted because no one had asked a question to test that skill.

 So, we mapped all of our requirements to interview steps to make sure that we’d get enough signal on each.

Here’s how we lay out our interview process and some tips for each stage.

Resume review and cover letters

For senior roles, this is often a quick scan to see if they actually have the experience you need. For junior roles however, there’s a wealth of information you can evaluate at this stage: communication, leadership, product-like experience. Be very careful about unintentional bias — if you require an ivy-league degree you’ll be skipping over a lot of talented folks.

T**ake-home assignment**

At Asana we use a take-home assignment early in the process because it lets us take more risks and consider less-traditional candidates. It gives us great signal on goal-setting, customer focus, product design, and overall judgement.

We do sometimes lose candidates who don’t want to do the assignment. If you’re using an assignment think carefully about the ethics of asking for “free work” and try to keep the assignment short and not directly related to your product.

Intro presentation

Most companies start each interview with “tell me about yourself”, or an abrupt jumping into questions without any introduction. We switched to having the candidate do an intro presentation once to all the interviewers at the start of the day. It gives the candidate a chance to shine and lets the 1:1 interviewers manage their time better.

Product design questions

These questions are a little scary to ask because the answers can really go in any direction and sometimes you can get stuck on what follow-up question to ask or how to know if their idea is actually any good or not. To help with this, plan your prompts and follow-up questions ahead of time. Pay attention to time and make sure to steer the interview to touch on all the areas you care about — for example getting them to draw on the whiteboard.

One skill we like to test in these questions is “Can you design for someone who is different than yourself”. To get at that, you might find that you need to switch up the question or guide them more strongly for candidates who happen to have past experience — eg. don’t ask “design an alarm clock for the blind” to someone who works on screen reading software.

Analytical questions

Time for a confession: I hate the traditional analytical questions like “how many pizza restaurants are in the US”. They just terrify me.

Instead, I base my analytical questions on real experiences I’ve run into where analytical skill was important, many of which are related to analyzing experiment results. Make sure to test your new analytical questions on PMs you respect, both in and out of your company to make sure they’re not too much of a trick question.

“Tell me about a time when…” questions

A tricky thing about product managers is that it can be very hard to separate out their contributions from the rest of their team. They might have gotten lucky and been put on a great team, rather than really driving the success, or vice versa.

With behavioral questions, you can start to really dive in to figure out the scope of their responsibilities and what their unique contributions were. I like to ask a lot about what alternatives they considered and what kinds of resistance they faced to get a fuller picture.

Testing for soft skills

Behavioral questions are incredibly helpful for testing for soft skills like collaboration and mindset. I ask directly about how they handled tough situations and have been incredibly impressed at how clear a view I get of what it would be like to work with them.

Another trick is to make sure that you push back on at least one idea of theirs during design questions. Ask why they wouldn’t design it a different way and see how open they are to your suggestion.

Avoiding trick questions

Many PM interview questions can accidentally become trick questions. A candidate thinks you’re testing their analytical skill but actually you were looking for customer focus. These trick questions can cause you to falsely assume a candidate doesn’t have a skill, just because they interpreted your question poorly.

One way to address this is to tell them up front what you’re looking for in the question: “I’m trying to get a sense of how you debug problems”. Another way is to carefully frame the type of answer you’re looking for: “What questions would you ask to decide what to do”.

A very common trick question I see is that the interviewer wants to know if the candidate will ask questions before jumping into problem solving, so they hide key information in framing the question. This is really tough because people act differently in an interview setting, especially when they are guessing you want them to jump in or are afraid to be rude to the interviewer.

Careful framing to make it clear that you’re asking about a hypothetical, rather than directly asking the question can help here: “Imagine I’m a sales person and I ask you how you would build X”. You can also try asking directly like “Have you ever had a time when what people asked for didn’t end up being what they wanted? How did you figure it out?”

Create a great candidate experience

While you’re interviewing the PM, remember they’re also interviewing you to see if they’d want to work at your company. Treat your candidate experience like a product and look for ways to make it easy and enjoyable.

Some of the basics are: reply to candidates in a timely manner throughout the whole process, be polite and attentive during interviews, give them a chance to tell you about themselves, and leave time for them to ask you questions.

One tip I’ve learned for selling candidates on the role — first ask them what they’re looking for in their next role, then focus your pitch on the things they care about.

Interviewing candidates well is incredibly important and valuable. When you get it right you’re able to recognize talented people who will make a huge contribution to your team. When you get it wrong you accidentally exclude people who would have been great, or hire people who don’t end up working out.