10 Techniques for Better Product Backlog Management
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Successful Agile teams manage their backlogs (prioritized queues of work) well. A team typically maintains backlogs for the product being built, incremental releases, and each iteration. According to the Scrum Guide, "The Product Backlog is an ordered list of everything that might be needed in the product and is the single source of requirements for any changes to be made to the product. The Product Owner is responsible for the Product Backlog, including its content, availability, and ordering." The Product Backlog is a "parts list" of user stories, bug fixes, epics, and tasks that describe features, functions, enhancements, and fixes for current and future releases. It's what the development team converts into a working product in increments called sprints or iterations.

Creating the backlog is not easy. Requirements collection and specification is largely an art and it takes time to fully define the vision for a product. User stories that describe that vision should be Independent, Negotiable, Valuable, Estimable, Small, and Testable (INVEST). Each user story or epic should describe a specific benefit. Product backlog items should include a priority, effort estimate, and some quantification of organizational value. The backlog should be visible to everyone as well as detailed, estimated, emergent, and prioritized (DEEP). Once a product backlog exists, dynamics inside and outside an organization make it a challenge to manage.

As an organization's internal and external environments change, the product vision (and hence, the backlog) must evolve with them. The Product Owner should involve other stakeholders (development team members, business representatives, users, etc.) when maintaining the alignment. Backlog refinement (i.e., grooming) manages the vision by collaboratively adding details, estimates, and priorities to backlog items with the goal that two iterations of backlog items are always "ready" for development. That means the items are stable; can be completed by one person within a sprint; have acceptance criteria, priorities, and effort estimates; and are impediment-free. Typical grooming activities include removing irrelevant user stories, creating new stories, reassessing priorities (especially after adding new stories), adding/revising effort estimates (preferably with story points!), and splitting user stories into smaller units of work.

Here are other best practices to improve your product backlog management:
1. **Have a single Product Owner.** If you have multiple people in this role (e.g., because there are multiple decision makers or multiple Scrum teams), then designate one to be the lead to provide consistency and unity.
2. **Consider personas (user types) and workflows** (e.g., typical day or interaction session) to identify all the user stories needed to complete a product vision. Also consider exceptions, user interface details, technical implementation, and sub steps when writing user stories.
3. **Include stories that address technical debt.** Make sure the development team, Product Owner, and other business stakeholders agree on the percentage of time to spend on technical debt. Over time, I recommend the team reserve 20-40% of its capacity to pay off technical debt, refactor, and explore architectural innovations. This leaves 60-80% of the team's capacity for new features.
4. **Quantify the business value of backlog items** and use that to drive prioritization.
5. Also **consider dependencies and risk** when prioritizing backlog items. Note dependent tasks that need to be coordinated with other teams and complete high-risk features sooner.
6. **Maintain a release plan**, which maps backlog items to incremental releases. Ideally, the release plan will reflect target markets and expected outcomes.

7. **Use a backlog planning/management tool** to capture items and their attributes (e.g., priorities and estimates), sort items by priorities, flag impediments and dependencies, and facilitate sprint planning by assigning the items to an iteration.
8. **Each team should spend 1-2 hours per week on backlog refinement.** Don't wait for a sprint to end to start preparing the next set of items because team members will be focused on completing their assignments and the process might be rushed.
9. **Remind team members** one business day in advance of backlog grooming sessions. Do informal backlog grooming with a smaller group before larger, more formal sessions.
10. **Make a conscious decision to add something to the backlog.** It's okay to throw an epic on the backlog to capture something during a brainstorming session but understand the cost to keep items on the backlog. Once they are there, items need to be reviewed and refined, which takes time away from other potentially more valuable tasks.

Following these best practices will enable you to create a comprehensive Product Backlog, keep it aligned with evolving organizational priorities and target customers, and ultimately deliver a product that is well received.

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