



THE FUTURE OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT REPORT

POWERED BY



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It's 2021, finally. And while last year many fields ground to a halt, it was the opposite for product.

Roadmaps raced ahead. Products ignited new growth. Years-worth of transformation in months. And product teams had a critical stake in all of it. But most of us are now asking: where's it heading next?

Curious about the future of the product field—new-normal and beyond—we surveyed thousands of product leaders in the closing days of 2020 for their take. From expectations to aspirations for their careers, tech, tools,

leadership, growth patterns and more, these answers bring macro trends into micro focus of what's on track to shape the road ahead.

Whether you're charting a career, seeking industry intel direct from the (crowd)source, or curious about the product-led trajectory, read on for a close up on the future of product management.

Now Trending


TOP 5 TRENDS FOR THE FUTURE OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

Here's your TL;DR on the top 5 findings



01 **PRODUCT IS GROWING IN EVERY WAY** – companies hiring, salaries rising, and PM's in the spotlight to drive revenue. 

02 **TRAINING AND GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES ARE THE CRITICAL CRITERIA** for choosing and staying with a company. 

03 **CAREER PATHS ARE WIDENING**, as product teams are more strategic than ever. 

04 **MORE BUSINESSES ARE BECOMING PRODUCT-LED**, vs sales-led or marketing-led. 

05 **ANYONE CAN BUILD DIGITAL PRODUCTS** (not just PMs) with no-code tools. 

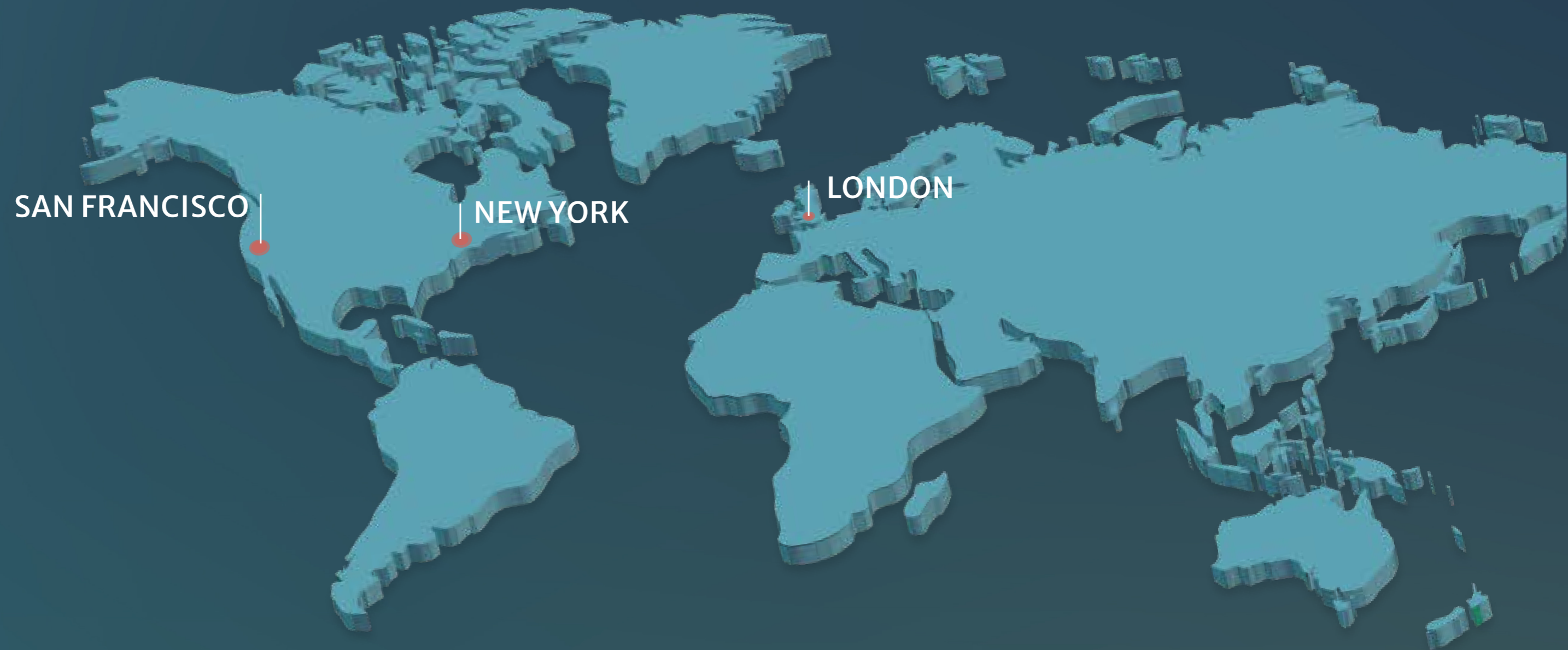
Curious for more? Let's dig in. 

Survey Breakdown

Who responded? Tapping into the Product School global network of experienced Product Managers (PM's), we heard from thousands of respondents worldwide. The largest share weighed in from product hotspots of Silicon Valley, New York, and London, ranging across different industries and companies including Apple, Google, and Mercedes-Benz all the way to early-stage startups. They offer a cross-section vantage point of the future of hardware, software, and services-driven products across both B2B and B2C.

From this critical mass we've spliced and diced the data to get at a thorough understanding of the most impactful factors shaping the road ahead.

Let's unpack the data starting with the 2020 experiences where product played a pivotal role.



Google

Booking.com

Mercedes-Benz

Microsoft

Findings Explained

WHAT PMS SAY ABOUT

THE FUTURE OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT

FINDING #01

2020 solidified PMs in the driver's seat of digital transformation.

With over half accelerating roadmaps and spearheading digital transformation efforts, PMs pressed forward in a stalled year to meaningfully impact their company bottom line. No longer riding shotgun, they're here to stay in the driver's seat of monetization and growth long-term.


FINDING #01

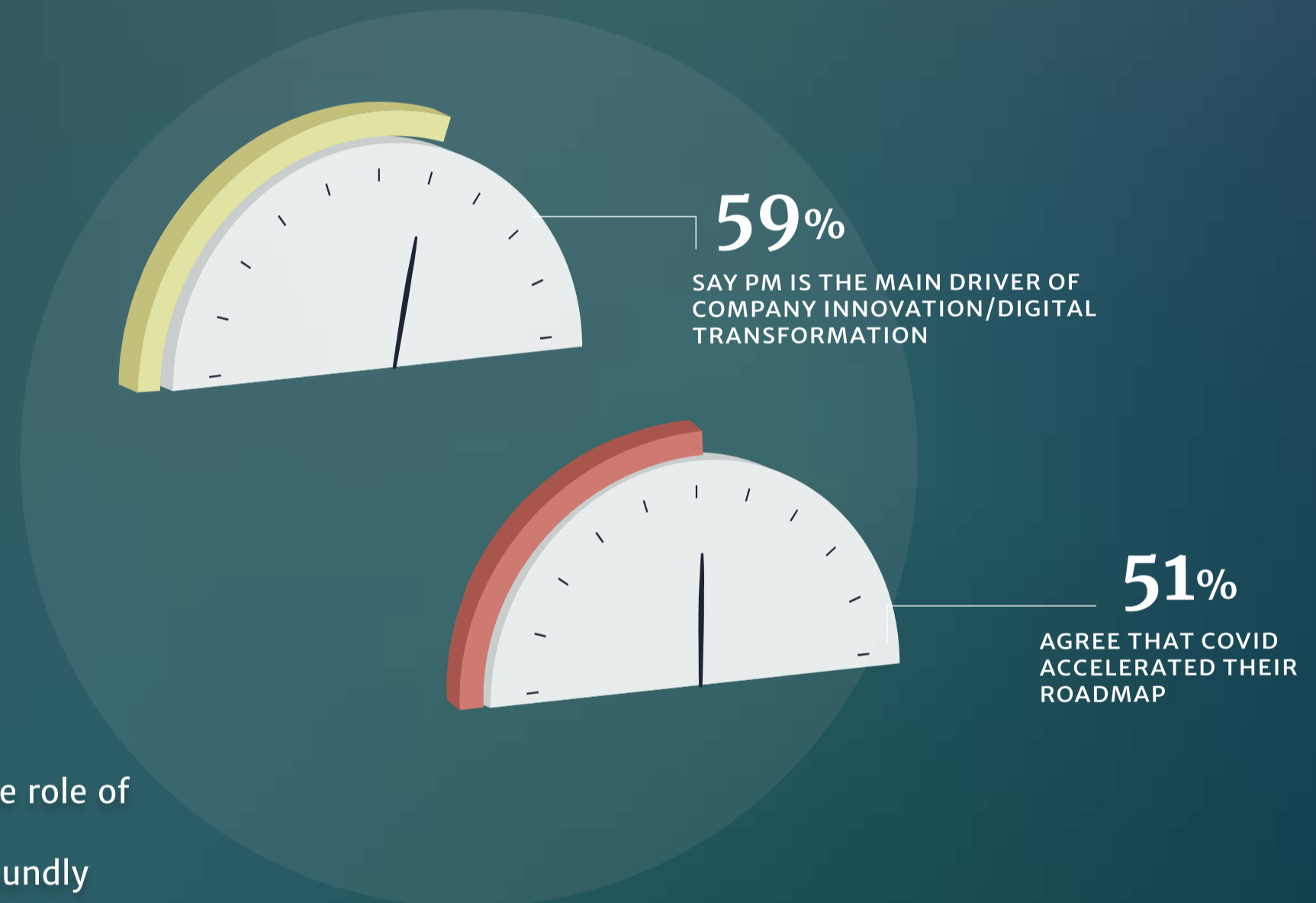
Driving Digital Transformation

As shutdowns set in and companies scrambled, PMs played a pivotal role in, well, pivoting to the new normal of 2020 and future yet to unfold.

Half of product teams accelerated roadmaps directly in response to COVID-19. Ramping up amidst lockdown, they moved to develop faster and move the needle not just on products, but the essential growth to get their companies through the unprecedented year. PMs played an outsize role in enabling digital transformation and innovation with **59% agreeing: "Product Management is the main driver of innovation/digital transformation in my company."**

Beyond products alone, PMs are assuming the role of visionaries and architects lining up the core ingredients for operational success in a profoundly changed world.

2020 put the spotlight on the PM role as a central, strategic growth-driving function, and there's no turning back now. PMs will be leading the charge as companies face the ever-more digital and uncertain challenges ahead. 



PM role as a central, strategic growth-driving function



“We’ve seen two years’ worth of digital transformation in two months.”

SATYA NADELLA
CEO OF MICROSOFT

FINDING #02

Product is still art, but increasingly a science.

In the great debate over whether the product profession is “art or science,” the pendulum is swinging firmly towards science. Now that product is seen as a vital contributor to company growth, the need for formalized benchmarks and best practices is taking on a new urgency.

FINDING #02

Product Pendulum: Art vs. Science



PMs becoming more scientific to deliver on strategy and growth objectives

We asked PMs an often-debated question: is the PM role more art or science?

Almost half agree that it is a science, signs of the pendulum swinging from years past as PM's become more essential pillars of strategy and growth. With this comes the demand for more formalized, framework-driven best practices that are widely shared and standardized across the field to elevate the PM craft towards maximum impact.

As for those classifying product as more of an ad hoc art form? They remind us that while the product craft may be scientific, it nonetheless demands both **left and right brain thinking** to take on the unknowns of the future.

FINDING #03

Salaries and hiring are on the rise.

It's a good time to be in product. Salaries are 3x higher than the U.S. mean average, and over 55% of respondents say they're hiring in the next six months. Whether staying put or making a move, PMs can feel confident in job security and bright prospects ahead — not something everyone can count on in the wake of 2020.

FINDING #03

Salaries and Hiring on the Rise

Let's talk hard numbers:

\$159,000

The average total compensation for a PM in San Francisco is \$159,000.

Salary 3x

The mean salary for a PM is 3x that of other U.S. occupations.

PM's salaries

Of the 1,040 recognized U.S. occupations, only 22 have a higher salary than PM's.

It's clear that product ranks in the upper echelons of well-compensated professions, proving resilient against the cutbacks and hiring freezes that other roles faced in the pandemic.

What's more, organizations are hiring. Over 55% say they plan to hire at least 1 new PM in the first 6 months of 2021.



FINDING #04

Breaking into product now possible for more backgrounds than ever.

When it comes to typical PMs and those entering the field, **it's no longer a one-size-fits-all blueprint of engineers and MBAs alone.** The persona of a typical PM is reshaping fast with changing perceptions and accessible tools rebaselining the field's entry and success criteria.

FINDING #04

Career Backgrounds Reshaping

Today's PM's came from many backgrounds - engineering, computer science, business, design, and more. And perceptions are changing around what qualifies someone to enter the field. While two-thirds agree that **technical/engineering degrees or MBA's offer an edge in the job market, the range of distinct backgrounds make the case that a technical degree is not a fixed prerequisite, nor is an MBA or PhD.**

The proliferation of low-code, visual tools is also intensifying this trend. As work relies more on accessible platforms without the need to code, future PM's will continue to break the traditional mold and enter the field from all sizes, shapes, and styles.



FINDING #05

Product career paths offer many ways to grow, namely three key tracks: individual contributor, people manager, and entrepreneurship.

PMs are discovering career paths that cater to many different personality types and goals. Whether managing people, founding a company, or making a mark as an individual contributor the options are proliferating to “choose your own adventure” and thrive along the way.

FINDING #05

Career Paths Offer Countless Ways to Grow

Asked “Where do you see yourself in the next 5 years?”

PM’s intend to take their careers in many directions. Three main paths are emerging to fuel that growth:

1

Individual contributor

High-impact role that does not manage people and remains fully-focused on product-specific work with increasing expertise and specialization over time.

2

People Manager

Leading a team of others with a product-related mission while spending more time on vision, culture, and reaching shared goals to grow both the products and people involved.

3

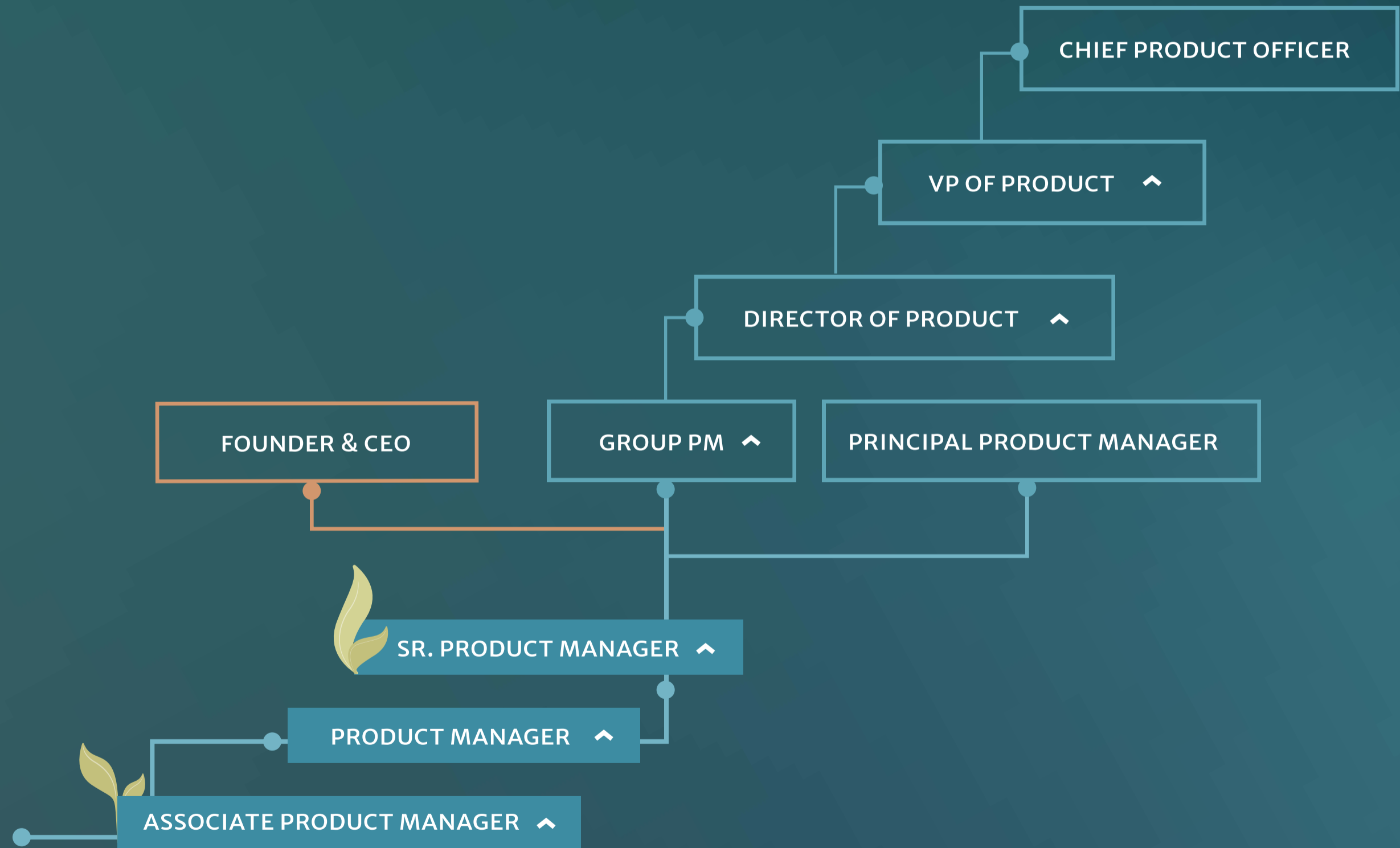
Entrepreneurship / Founder

PM’s that branch out from the typical career ladder to found and lead their own company with ownership across the entire business. This is an option at any point in the career journey, and many founders later return to PM jobs to focus less on running the business and purely on building products.

FINDING #05

Career Paths Offer Countless Ways to Grow

To continue growing, here are the common paths within each track

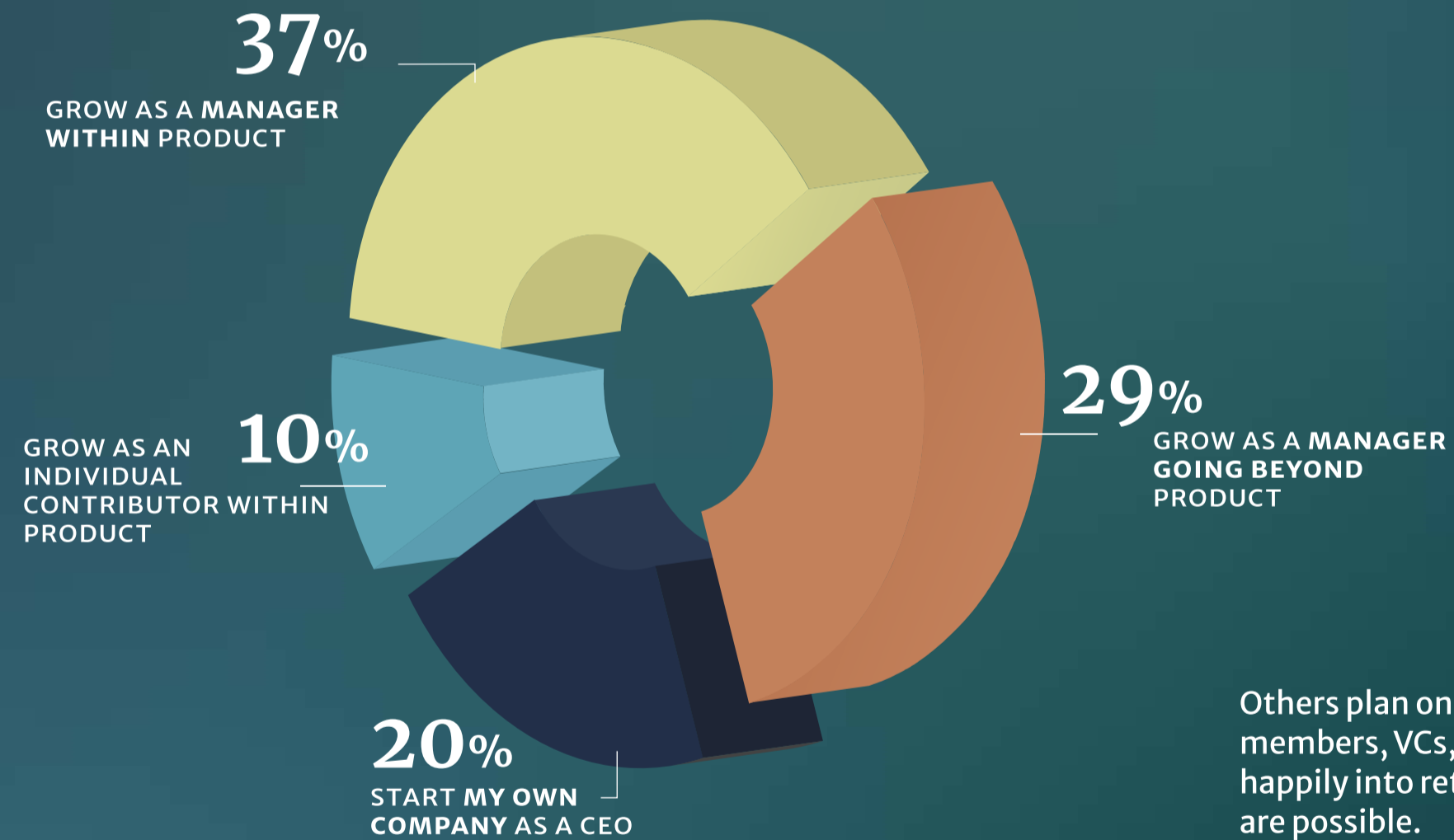


Typical Job Progression

FINDING #05

Career Paths Offer Countless Ways to Grow

Of those paths, here's the breakdown of where PMs say they're heading next:



FINDING #06

The C-Suite may soon be the “Product Suite” with more PMs at the table than ever.

Recognition of product’s place on the executive team is growing, with **16% of CEOs rising from Product backgrounds, and 31% of companies now with official CPOs**. And with two-thirds of PM sights set on management, the pipeline of future executives is strong.

FINDING #06

C-Suite Adding Product CEOs & CPOs

CEO FROM
PRODUCT
BACKGROUNDS

16%

31%
COMPANIES
WITH OFFICIAL
CPOS

66%

PMS THAT ASPIRE
TO MANAGEMENT

*66% of PMs want to
be people managers*

The C-Suite is converging with the “Product Suite” with unprecedented numbers of product leaders represented. **16% of respondents are lead by CEO’s from product backgrounds, and 31% companies have official CPO’s on their executive teams.**

Virtually unknown just a few years ago, the CPO role is gaining recognition as a necessary function for some organizations. More CEO’s from product backgrounds also means greater clout, influence, and decision-making potential driven by product thinkers. Product has a decisive seat at the decision-making table (possibly more than one) to set direction and define culture for the wider company.

Looking ahead, the management aspirations of 66% of PMs signals a full pipeline of up-and-coming executives to continue this trend. Expect to see PM’s becoming GM’s as this trend gains steam.



*“CEOs should focus on their products.
The financials come as a result.”*

ELON MUSK
CEO OF TESLA & SPACEX

T E S L A

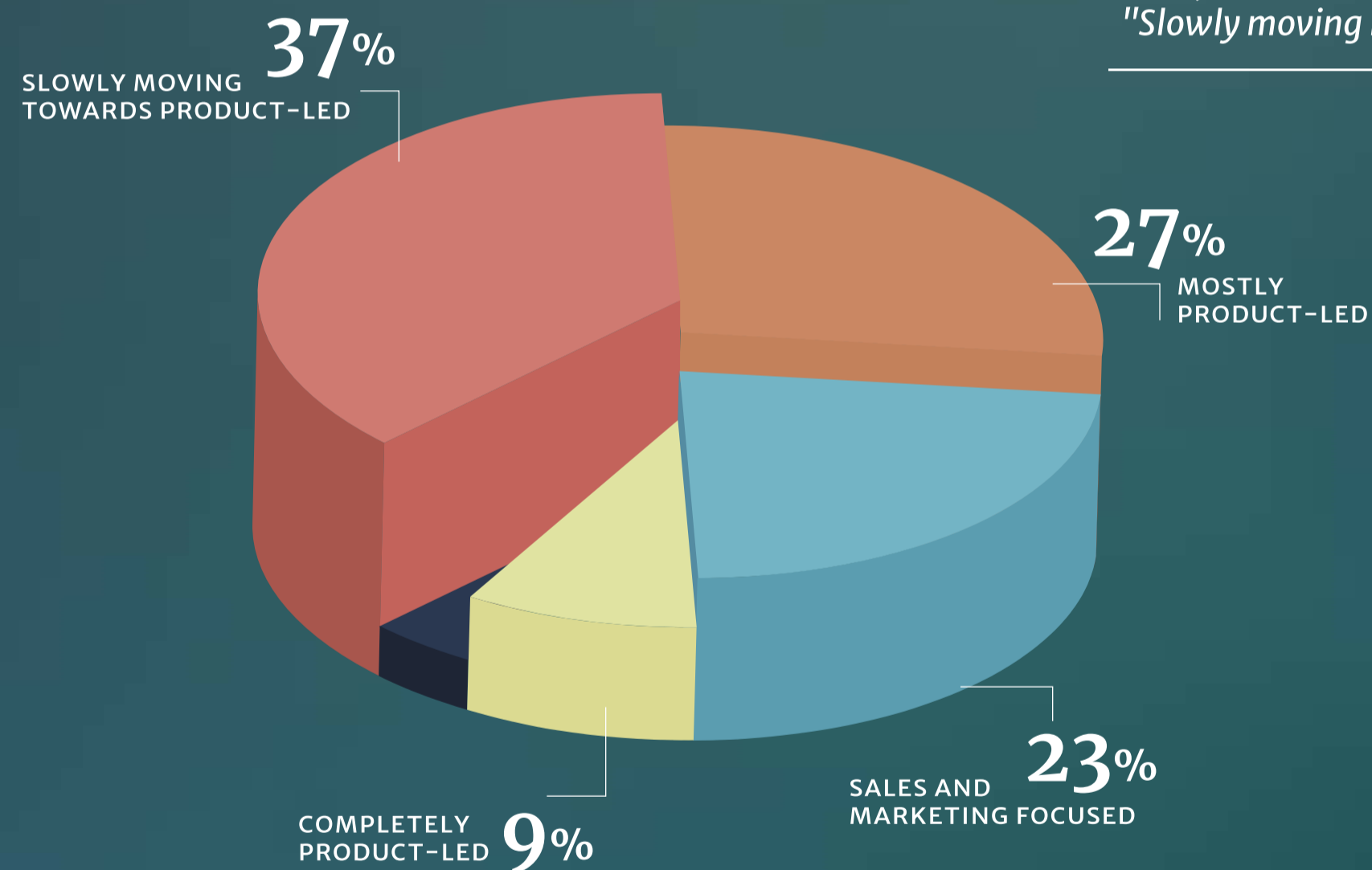
FINDING #07

It's an all-out sprint towards Product-Led Growth

A natural extension of PMs rising to the C-Suite is go-to-market strategies steered towards product-led growth. **Over 73% describe their companies as “product-led”** with products inherently driving user value to fuel revenue generation. This product-led growth (PLG) spree is accelerating with 9% “all in,” 27% mostly product-led, and 37% taking purposeful steps in this direction with each business cycle.

FINDING #07

Product-Led Growth Is Accelerating



73% are product-led in some form, either "All In," "Mostly" or "Slowly moving in that direction"

With more product-oriented CEOs and CPOs at the top, will sales and marketing-centric cultures shift towards product-led growth? Survey says: Yes.

Asked to rate "How Product led is your company" the progression towards product as the dominant growth vehicle is clear. **Over 9% are "Completely product-led" and "All In" today. 64% are heading that way, either "Mostly product-led" or "Slowly moving in that direction."** While 23% are still sales and marketing focused, the trendline clearly points to product emerging as the inherently scalable, sustainable growth source of experiences users love and continue buying into.



“Product management is really the shepherd for the product-led organization. Product teams provide the people, processes and data to help their companies embrace automation, which leads to better products that people actually use.”

TODD OLSON
PENDO CEO



FINDING #08

Product teams are evolving in complexity, with the rise of “Growth PM” and other specialized roles

Org charts for product teams now include everyone from Product Operations, to Product Marketing to Growth PM titles as companies hire for adjacent skillsets to ratchet up product success. These high-popularity niche roles further expand the scope of exciting career avenues available to PMs.

FINDING #08

Product Teams Becoming More Complex

Scan LinkedIn or Indeed and you'll see **dozens of postings for non-traditional roles like "Growth PM," Product Operations, and Product Marketing** barely visible just a few years ago.

These specialized, hybrid-offshoot roles from the typical product track **underscore how product organizations are becoming more complex as companies shore up monetization strategy, business models, and communications** with critical product hires. They also give product leaders even more options to lean into personal strengths and expertise making the most of their unique "superpowers" to impact targeted areas.

Product is becoming synonymous with growth.





mixpanel
● ● ●

“People have made significant changes to the way they work, consume, and interact both with digital products, and with one another. There will be few moments as profound as this to shape the products that will lead categories for decades to come. Product managers are at the forefront of that.”

AMIR MOVAFAGHI
CEO AT MIXPANEL

FINDING #09

What PMs value most on the job (and where companies miss the mark): **Learning and Mentorship**

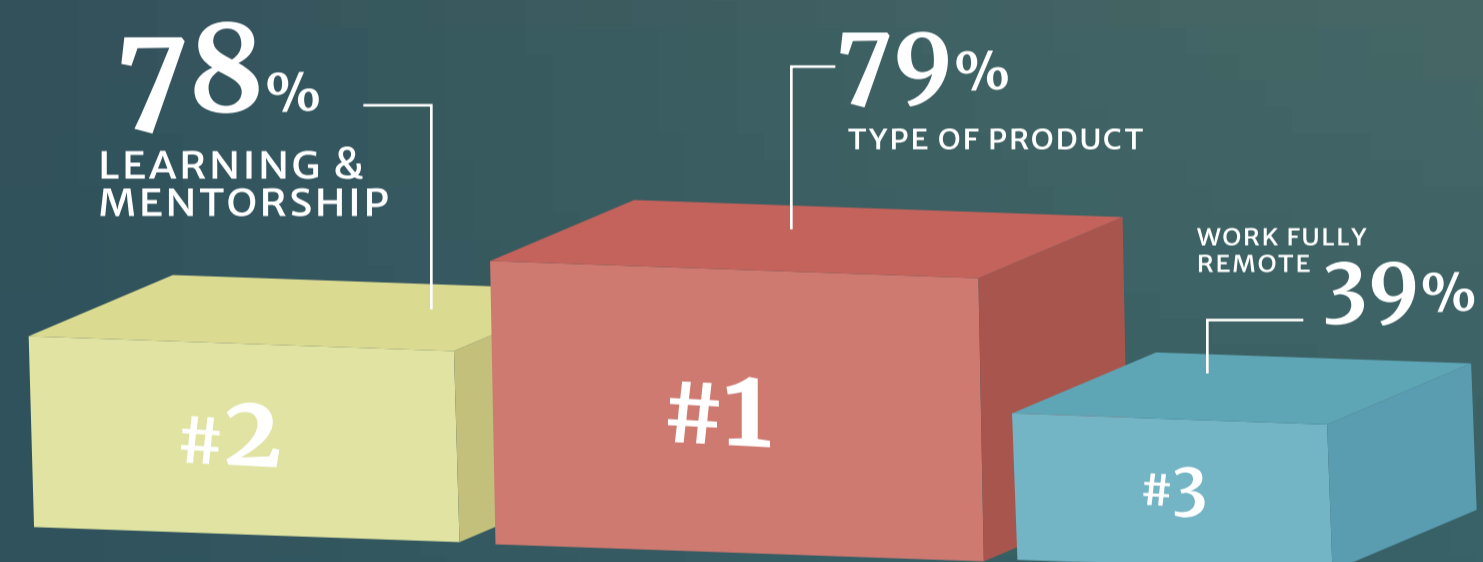
Voting on what factors they value most at work (aside from compensation) **almost 8 out of 10 ranked Learning and Mentorship right at the top.** Edging out even equity and company brand, this proves just how focused PM's are on their professional development above all. Problem is, **companies aren't keeping pace, with only 40% investing in formal education** stipends to keep PM's skilled-up and engaged for the long-term.

FINDING #09

Factors Valued Most at Work & Company Shortfalls

Asked: “Cash compensation aside, what are the top 3 factors you value the most at work?” PMs voiced where their true priorities lie, and how companies are shortchanging their long-term growth.

Barely a percentage point behind the #1 spot (“Type of Product”) was the overwhelming 78% that named Learning and Mentorship as the critical factor they value most at work. Outranking even equity and job title, this reveals how hungry PM’s are to grow their skills—and expect companies to support them on the way.



This brings us to one of the biggest surprises in the data...companies are falling way short on investments to support the PM desire for learning. **Just 40% of companies offer formal education stipends – a glaring gap vs what PMs say they value most.**

FINDING #09

Gap Between PM Desire for Learning and Company Investments in Training

WHAT PMS WANT VS. WHAT COMPANIES ARE GIVING THEM



A stark reminder that building competitive, innovative products is no easy feat, PMs are voicing their need for learning and development to support them on the way. **HR teams, hiring managers, and company leadership: consider this your wake up call.** Failure to invest in employees so critical to growth risks not just attracting and retaining PMs, but long-term competitive advantage too.



“Product Managers are lifelong learners by nature and motivated by big challenges. Put differently, no great Product Manager will stay long in a company that doesn’t invest in their own personal growth.”

CARLOS GONZALEZ DE VILLAUMBROSIA
CEO AT PRODUCT SCHOOL

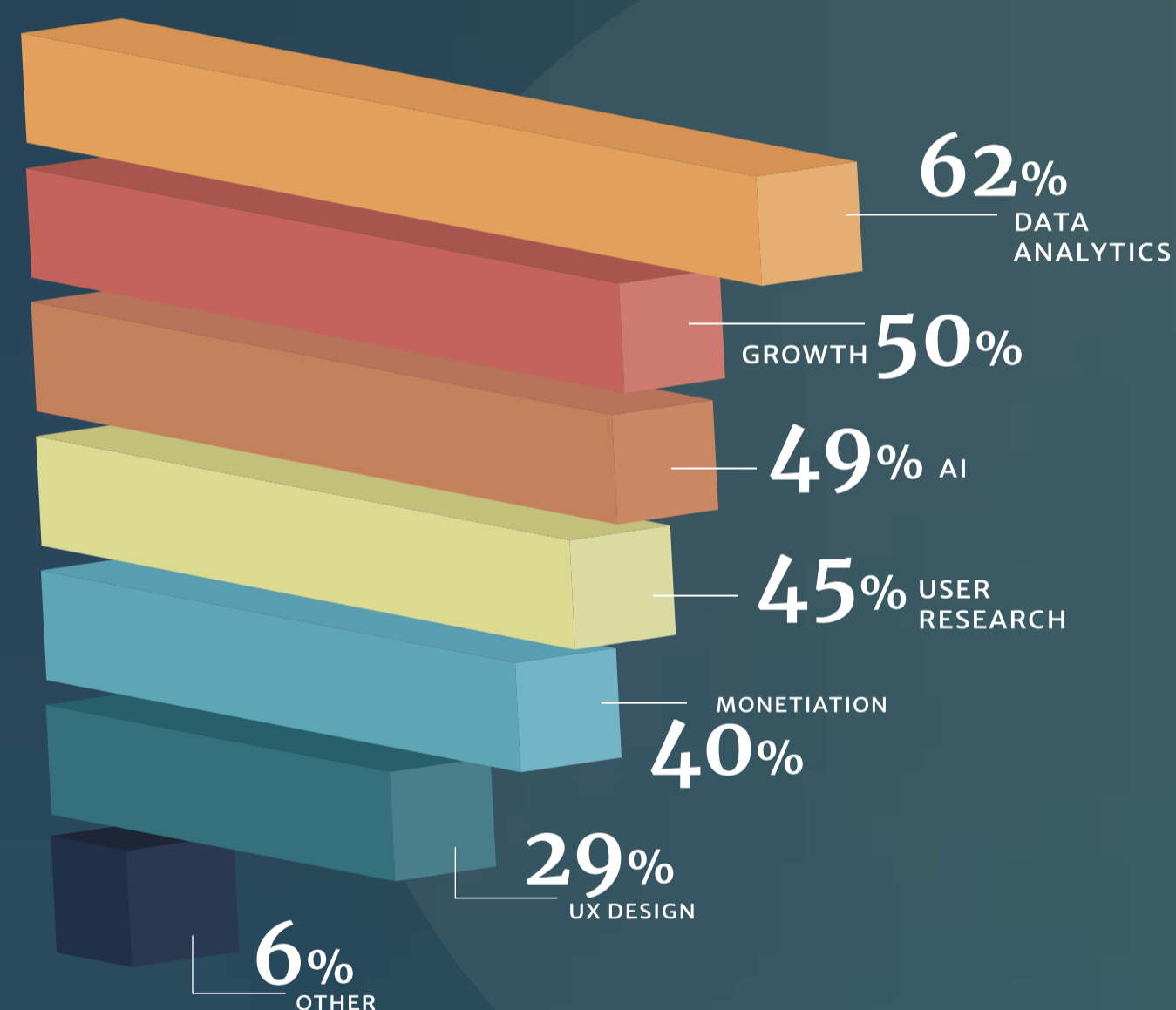
FINDING #10

Analytics is the next frontier, but raw data isn't enough.

The #1 skill PMs are prioritizing for improvement is data analytics, followed by growth and AI. Raw data alone won't suffice, because a PMs time is money (literally) demanding action-ready insights delivered as fluid, accessible experiences.

FINDING #10

Analytics Is the Next Frontier



Of the skills PM's want to get better at, **62% zeroed in on Data Analytics as #1**, 50% ranked Growth at #2, and 49% said AI for #3. Notably, these **rank higher than more traditionally technical skills** like Coding and User Research, underlining the interest in skills for broader-reaching business impact.

Vendors take note: with data analytics so central to every decision, **PMs aren't content with raw Data Scientist-level data but tools delivering an accessible, shorter path to insights.** Getting to what's inside the numbers with recommendations, predictive analytics and the "where, when, and how" to extract its value is the new scorecard by which your tech is judged.



“Data shouldn’t be just for data teams – it should be for everybody. Especially product managers! While useful data and insights were once available only to people with technical backgrounds, they’re now there for anyone who wants it. In 2021, product analytics tools will do even more of the work for you.”

MATIN MOVASSATE
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF HEAP

FINDING #11

Tech & tools must be low-code/no-code, visual, and integrated.

The proliferation of tools catering to PM's hinge on **one critical capability: low-code/no-code experiences**. It's becoming table stakes for PM's to build tech stacks around visual and accessible tools, echoing **Gartner's forecast that this will account for over 65% of application platforms by 2024.**

FINDING #11

Tech and Tools Means Low-Code/No-Code



*“Minimal or no learning curve”
is a critical factor*

PMs have come a long way from piggybacking off tools built for other functions (Excel, Photoshop, etc.) with an entire new category catering specifically to product needs.

From roadmaps, to wireframing, to data analysis, one critical must-have is rising to the top: visual low-code/no-code experiences. 49% of PMs called out “Minimal or no learning curve” as a critical factor when it comes to investing in tech and tools, showing how accessible, visual tools that lessen the need for technical backgrounds are becoming the go-to.

Vendors take note: Gartner analysts agree that by 2024 almost two-thirds of all platforms will be entirely low-code so the trend is intensifying fast. Tolerance is already low for anything other than visual-first experiences so get ahead of the curve now.

FINDING #12

PMs to vendors: integrate or be passed over.

PMs voted ease of integration as priority #1 *and* #2 when it comes to choosing their tech and tool investments. Loud and clear they're seeking tools they can quickly and easily adopt into their existing stacks. For vendors, the implication is clear: no integration, no consideration.

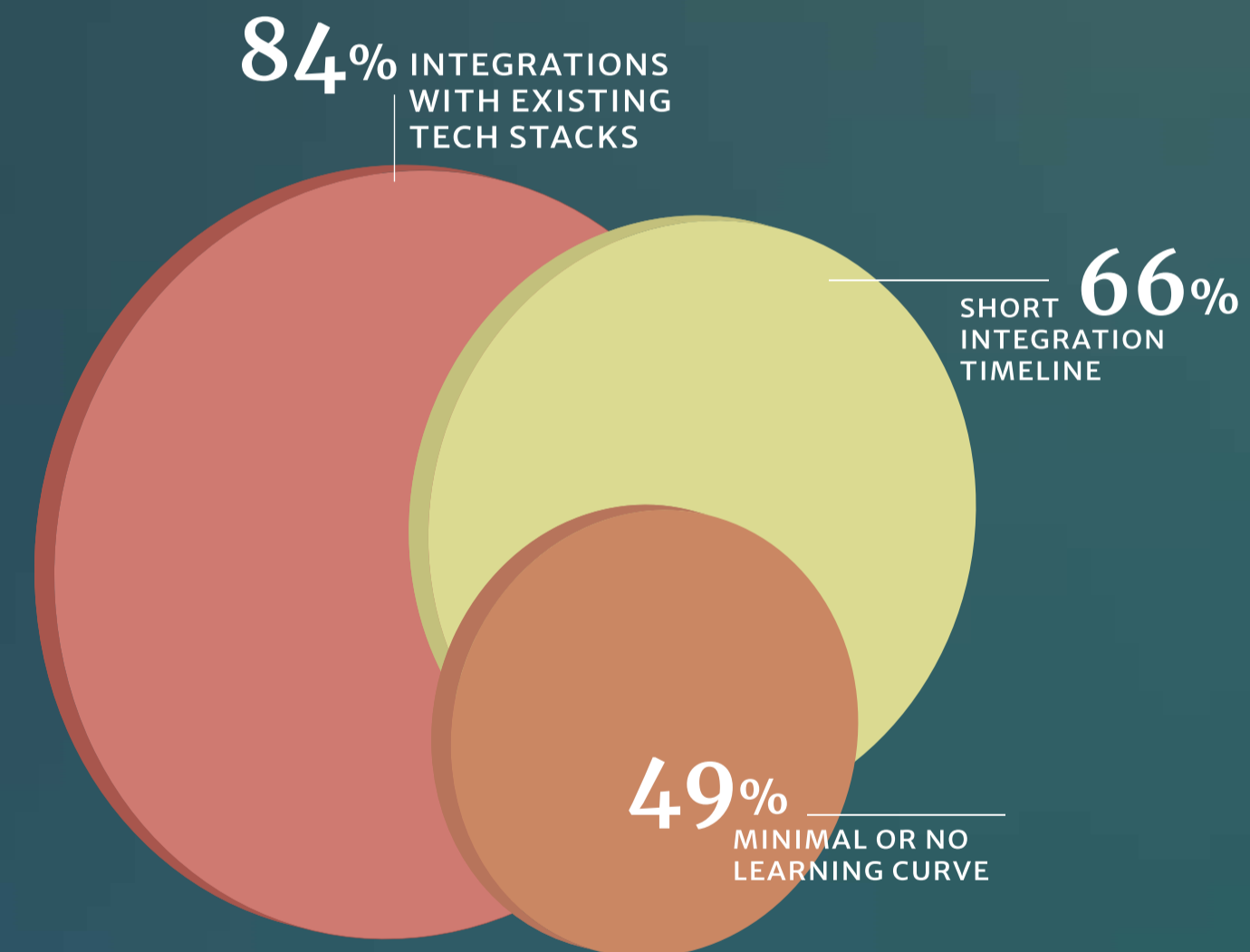
FINDING #12

Integration is the Critical Capability in the Product Stack

When selecting new tools, the PM consensus is that integration is everything. Asked: “Price and functionality aside, what are the top factors your Product team values the most when purchasing a new tool?” the consensus was:

- Criteria #1: **“Integration with existing tech stacks”** – ranked first by 84%
- Criteria #2: **“Short integration timeline”** – ranked second by 66%

Notably, even the proverbial HIPPO in the room (Highest Paid Person’s Opinion) ranked far below these at just 21%, evidence of product teams’ strong autonomy to set their own decision factors. There’s no room for doubt: those decisions start and end with integration.





M U R A L

“Collaboration is more important than ever as more companies are embracing remote work. Design thinking methodologies and no code tools empower users to co-create solutions in a visual way. Ultimately, this helps entire organizations unlock innovation at scale.”

MARIANO SUAREZ-BATTAN
CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF MURAL

Conclusion

FINAL THOUGHTS

Final Thoughts

Now for a quick retrospective before we wrap. The future of product is: synonymous with growth, visual-first-data-everywhere, critical function set to shape the next “Roaring 20’s” ahead.

Product Management is no longer simply a stakeholder in their company's future, but crucial driver of what will define the next normal.

With influence extending far beyond what they're building, product leaders are uniquely positioned to steer through the urgent, uncertain path forward. The mandate now falls to companies, vendors, and everyone to partner in a shared mission of product-led purpose.

Get ready to face this fast-approaching Future of Product with help from these action items:

Action Items for PMs

Stake your claim as a growth agent, defining your own product-led path forward from the expanding slate of options.

Keep pace with peers laser-focused on professional growth by purposefully and continuously developing your superpower skills

Action Items for Companies

Recognize the energy ready to burst from product teams, and mobilize operations for the product-led growth engine to thrive.

Acknowledge the weight PM's place on learning and development, and budget for it ensuring you have top talent ready meet the future head-on.

Action Items for Vendors

Don't underestimate expectations for low-code, visual, and integrated tools as the new scorecard you're judged against.

Anticipate PM's of all profiles you're selling to, unleashing your own PLG by handing over the keys to accessible, action-ready insights.

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