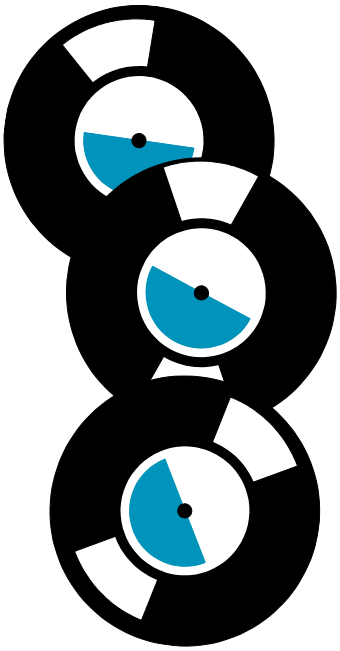
Project Toolbox

Product Planning, The Top 10 List



Michelle, a project manager, and Mike, a marketing manager, were in a meeting, arguing over the product requirements. Mike said, "I NEED these requirements in this product." Michelle responded, "We can't fit them all into this release. We have to make choices about what goes into which release." Mike said, "How do I know I'm *ever* going to get these features if they're not on your list for this release?"

Mike's a smart guy. He knows that if he doesn't get a commitment from Michelle, he won't get what he's asking for. Michelle's no dummy either, and she doesn't want to commit to a project she *knows* she can't complete.

This tension is common to all kinds of product development. The marketing manager wants to make sure the project manager understands the product's direction. The project manager wants to focus on the needs of this release.

One way to address those concerns is to visibly separate the requirements of the current release from the requirements for the entire product, so everyone can see what you get now, and still see how the entire product will come together in the future. Mike and Michelle would then have a way to start discussing the product, without having to confuse future requirements with current requirements.

I introduced Mike and Michelle to the Top 10 list that I'd seen work for other clients. A Top 10 list is a bullet list of the "product achievements," things you want the product to be able to do, organized by quarter or release. The Top 10 list helps you see the direction of your product.

Some of my clients use this as a Top 20 or even a Top 40 list. The number on the list isn't as important as having a one-page list that sets priorities for things you want the product to do by release. Use the number of features or "product achievements" that you can easily list on one piece of paper.

I prefer to call these lists of "product achievements" to help differentiate these items from requirements. They may be feature lists, or a problem you want solved in the current version of the product. You haven't formally defined the requirements, so there are probably other ways to create those product achievements (problem solutions). Here's an example of the difference between a requirement and a "product achievement":

Requirement	Product Achievement
The product shall allow Class 1 users to create a digital signature. Class 2 and Class 3 users shall not be allowed to create digital signatures.	Digital Signature *(There is no differentiation of users and how they would use this feature, this is just a listing of the functionality or problem to be solved.)*

The table at the top of the next page shows an example of a product achievement list for an organization that releases quarterly. You don't have to do quarterly releases to use this technique; you can use this anytime you have more than one release of a product. I'll continue to use quarterly releases in the explanation, to be consistent.

During the initial project planning and requirements definition, the project team refines the requirements and defines how they will address these proposed achievements. At some point, they will know what they can accomplish for this release. When the project team knows, they insert a line in the current quarter's list of achievements. The line shows their promise to the rest of the company. Everything above the line, the company can expect to see in the release. Everything below the line will be included if possible, but it is most likely these items will be part of the next release.

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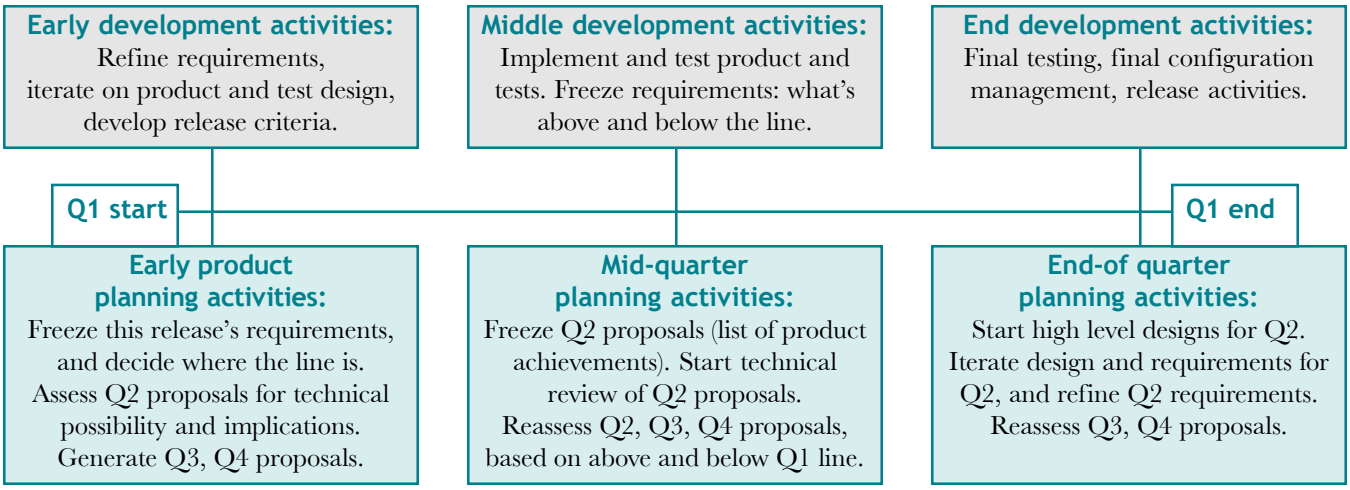
ACME Corp. Proposed Product Achievements Top 10 list by quarter			
This quarter (Q1)	Next quarter (Q2)	Third quarter (Q3)	Fourth quarter (Q4)
Component 1, parts a, b, c Signature encryption Access performance 10% better than previous release - - - -The LINE- - - - *(everything above the line: in this release, everything below: wish for this release)*	Component 1, parts d, e, f Enabling technology for major release next year API definition for major release … … … …	Natural language query Error message re-architecture … … … …	In-house report generator Web client … … … …

The project team reviews this list periodically, to make sure they are performing to the list. The marketing folks and the development managers review the list monthly to see if they want to take anything off the list, move things around from quarter to quarter, or add to the list. Marketing can't make the decisions by themselves; they need input from the technical staff to know whether their requests are possible.

Michelle and Mike now use this technique. They freeze the next quarter's proposals halfway through the current quarter. That way, the technical staff can assess the proposals for technical possibility, and to see if the proposals have other product implications. By the time the technical staff are ready to complete design, this quarter's proposals are frozen.

Here's a timeline view of the activities for a given quarter. Q1 is always the current quarter (or release). Q2 is the next quarter, Q3 is two quarters out, Q4 is three quarters out.



It's not always easy for Michelle and Mike to project product achievements more than three quarters out, so they only do that when they can. When it's too hard, they recognize it as a risk, and address the last quarter at their next monthly meeting.

Mike and Michelle still disagree with each other, but now they have a visual aid to help them talk about what they can accomplish. As a side benefit, their senior managers can see the list and discuss the tradeoffs with them. Mike uses the Top 10 List to make his tradeoffs clearer to Michelle and the technical staff. Michelle uses the Top 10 List to communicate what the technical staff can and will do in which time frame.

If you have a how-do-we-fit-everything-in-the-release or a release planning problem, the Top 10 List can help organize the problems you want your product to solve.

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