A PRODUCT LEADERS ALLIANCE
LEADERSHIP BRIEFING

November 2026

PRODUCT LEADERS ALLIANCE

THE RISE OF THE PRODUCT BUILDER

NINE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS FOR PRODUCT LEADERS IN AN AI-ENABLED WORLD

How AI is changing product roles, development economics and the way organisations create value.



In association with tarigo

productleadersalliance.com

EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

The Product Builder: Why Product Leaders should pay attention

AI is changing the economics of software development. Product teams can now research ideas, create prototypes, test alternatives and generate software faster than was possible even a few years ago.

The implications go well beyond productivity.

The boundaries between product management, engineering and design are becoming less rigid. Product managers can become more directly involved in building and testing solutions. Engineers can contribute earlier to customer discovery and product decisions. Smaller, more versatile teams may be able to undertake work that previously required several specialist handoffs.

This emerging capability is increasingly described as the **Product Builder**.

Research published by Products That Count in its 2026 CPO Insights Report, drawing on more than 1,500 Chief Product Officers, provides some indication of the scale of change:

- More than 80% of CPOs consulted reported materially faster development cycles through AI.
- Reported reliance on generalist product managers increased from 15% to 28% in the report's year-on-year comparison.
- Speed to market was identified as the leading internal challenge by 22% of CPOs, compared with 14% in 2025. while reinforcing a consistent message:

These are reported findings rather than independently measured productivity improvements. Nevertheless, they suggest that the way product organisations operate is changing.

For Product Leaders, the central question is not simply how much faster their teams can develop software. It is whether they can convert that increased capability into better products, stronger commercial results and a more effective organisation.

This briefing examines nine implications across four areas:

1. How product roles, teams and organisational structures may change.
2. Why faster development must translate into greater customer and commercial value.
3. How product leadership, investment decisions and accountability need to evolve.
4. What organisations can do now to build the capabilities required.

The Product Builder is not necessarily a new job title, nor does it mean every product manager must become an engineer or vice versa.

It represents a change in how customer understanding, commercial judgement and technical capability come together to create successful products.

The opportunity is significant. So is the risk of adopting new tools without changing how the organisation works.

THE CHANGING PRODUCT ORGANISATION

1. The Product Builder is emerging as a cross-functional capability

Traditionally, product management has concentrated on identifying customer needs, defining product direction and prioritising development. Engineering has been responsible for turning those decisions into working products.

AI is making these boundaries more flexible.

Product managers can increasingly develop working prototypes, explore customer journeys and test assumptions without waiting for a full development cycle. Engineers can use AI to explore alternative solutions and become more involved in determining what should be built.

This does not remove the need for specialist skills. Architecture, security, reliability, user research and design remain essential.

The opportunity is to reduce unnecessary handoffs and bring customer, commercial and technical thinking together earlier.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Review where traditional role boundaries slow down learning or decision-making.
- Consider whether broader skills and greater collaboration could improve speed, quality and cost without compromising specialist expertise.



THE CHANGING PRODUCT ORGANISATION

2. The bigger change may be organisational, not individual

Giving product managers access to coding tools does not, by itself, create a Product Builder organisation.

The more significant opportunity lies in how teams work together.

An effective Product Builder approach combines broader individual capabilities with complementary specialist expertise, shared customer understanding and clear responsibility for results.

This may challenge established organisational structures. For example, teams organised around separate functional responsibilities may spend considerable time translating requirements, reviewing decisions and waiting for specialist resources.

More integrated teams could reduce some of these costs, provided they have the right skills, decision-making authority and access to shared information.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Examine whether existing team structures support the fastest practical route from identifying a customer problem to delivering a successful product.
- The objective should be better organisational performance, not restructuring for its own sake.

3. Product management and engineering must evolve together

The Product Builder concept has implications for both professions.

Product managers will need greater technical understanding and the ability to use prototypes and experiments to support decisions.

Engineers will need stronger customer and commercial understanding so they can contribute to identifying opportunities, assessing alternatives and making product trade-offs.

Neither profession needs to absorb the other's entire responsibilities. Instead, both should be able to contribute more effectively to decisions that previously sat predominantly within one function. This requires joint leadership.

A product-led initiative that ignores engineering responsibilities will struggle. Equally, an engineering-led AI programme focused only on faster code generation may produce limited commercial benefit.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Work with engineering leadership to review responsibilities, skills, decision rights and performance measures.
- The goal is not simply to build software faster. It is to create teams that make better product decisions and deliver dependable solutions with less unnecessary effort.

FROM FASTER DEVELOPMENT TO GREATER VALUE

4. Faster development does not automatically create greater commercial value

AI can reduce the time needed to create prototypes and initial software. However, software development is only one component of successful product delivery.

A product must address a meaningful customer problem, work reliably, be commercially viable and achieve adoption.

Faster development may have limited value if customers do not use the resulting product or if implementation, support and maintenance costs outweigh the benefits.

There is also a danger that lower development costs encourage organisations to build more features without sufficient evidence of demand.

Product Leaders should therefore distinguish between three measures of speed:

- **Speed to learning:** How quickly can we establish whether an opportunity is worth pursuing?
- **Speed to delivery:** How quickly can we develop and release a dependable solution?
- **Speed to value:** How quickly do customers and the business realise the intended benefits?

These measures are connected, but they are not interchangeable.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Assess AI's contribution across the complete product lifecycle, not just development productivity.
- Useful measures include development cost, time to first customer value, adoption, revenue contribution, operating costs and customer retention.
- A feature delivered faster but never adopted is not a commercial success.



FROM FASTER DEVELOPMENT TO GREATER VALUE

5. The orchestration gap: Faster individual work can create a less effective organisation

Consider a product organisation in which product managers use AI to generate requirements, designers generate interfaces, engineers generate code and marketers generate launch material.

Each function may become more productive.

But if they are working from different assumptions about customers, product objectives or commercial priorities, the organisation may simply produce disconnected outputs more quickly.

This is the **orchestration gap**: the difference between improving individual productivity and improving the performance of the product organisation as a whole. Closing this gap requires shared information, consistent objectives and connected decision-making.

Customer evidence should influence design and engineering choices. Technical constraints should influence product commitments. Commercial performance should inform future investment.

AI tools can support these connections, but the underlying responsibilities and working practices must be established by the organisation.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Review how information and decisions move across product management, engineering, design and go-to-market teams.
- Identify where duplicated work, inconsistent assumptions and unnecessary approvals increase cost or delay.
- The greatest benefit from AI may come from improving the effectiveness of the whole product organisation rather than maximising the productivity of each function independently.

THE EVOLVING LEADERSHIP MANDATE

6. Product Leaders may increasingly become investors in opportunities

As the cost of exploring and developing solutions falls, deciding what deserves investment becomes even more important.

The 2026 Products That Count research describes the emergence of the *Chief Product Investor*: a product leader increasingly focused on portfolio decisions, strategic opportunities and allocating resources to the products most likely to create value.

The underlying principle is familiar.

Product Leaders are responsible for directing finite resources towards opportunities that support business objectives.

AI changes the speed and potentially the cost at which those opportunities can be explored. This creates the possibility of testing more ideas before committing substantial investment. It also creates a temptation to continue developing weak ideas simply because building has become easier.

Effective leadership requires clear investment criteria and a willingness to stop work when the evidence does not support further spending.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Strengthen the connection between product strategy, investment decisions and commercial performance.
- Consider whether product portfolios are reviewed against expected returns, customer evidence, strategic relevance and the full cost of development and operation.
- Reward teams for identifying weak opportunities early, not just for delivering completed features.



THE EVOLVING LEADERSHIP MANDATE

7. Human judgement and accountability become more important

AI can generate convincing outputs quickly. That does not mean those outputs are correct, commercially sound or suitable for production.

An AI-generated market analysis is not necessarily reliable market evidence. A working prototype does not establish customer demand. Generated code does not automatically meet security, reliability or regulatory requirements.

As AI increases the volume and speed of product activity, the ability to evaluate evidence and make sound decisions becomes more valuable.

Organisations must also maintain clear accountability.

Broader team participation should not create uncertainty about who owns product direction, technical acceptance, risk approval or release decisions.

Governance should reflect the consequences of the work being undertaken.

A disposable prototype using test data should not require the same approval process as a live service handling sensitive customer information.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Ensure teams understand the difference between assumptions, evidence and proven results.
- Maintain clear decision rights and proportionate controls, particularly where AI-generated outputs influence customer-facing products or commercially significant decisions.
- The aim is to enable faster decisions without sacrificing quality, accountability or customer trust.

BUILDING THE CAPABILITY

8. Developing Product Builders requires more than providing AI tools

Most product organisations are already experimenting with AI.

The harder challenge is developing the skills and working practices needed to use it effectively and consistently.

Product managers will need greater technical fluency. Engineers will need stronger customer and commercial understanding. Both will need the judgement to recognise when AI-generated outputs are useful, when they are unreliable and when specialist expertise is required.

The most important skills are not necessarily those associated with a particular AI platform. They include understanding customer problems, evaluating evidence, making commercial trade-offs, designing useful experiments and deciding what deserves further investment.

These capabilities need deliberate development.

Training people to operate AI tools is a starting point, but it does not demonstrate that they can make better product decisions.

Organisations should consider a combination of structured learning, realistic simulations, coaching and practical application to live product challenges.

Simulation can be particularly useful where people need to practise difficult decisions without putting customers, budgets or operational services at risk. For example, a team could work through a simulated product opportunity in which customer evidence changes, technical constraints emerge and the original commercial case weakens.

The learning comes from how the team responds and the decisions it makes, rather than the quality of the documents or prototypes it produces.

What this means for Product Leaders

- Review existing product and engineering capability frameworks against the requirements of AI-enabled working.
- Identify gaps in technical understanding, commercial judgement, experimentation and cross-functional collaboration.
- Build development plans that assess what people can apply in practice, not simply which AI tools they have learned to use.

A useful starting point is to ask three questions:

- Which capabilities will our teams need more of over the next two years?
- Where could broader skills reduce delays or improve decision-making?
- How will we establish whether investment in new skills is improving business performance?

The objective is not to turn every employee into a generalist.

It is to develop teams that combine broader working knowledge with the specialist expertise needed to build and operate successful products.

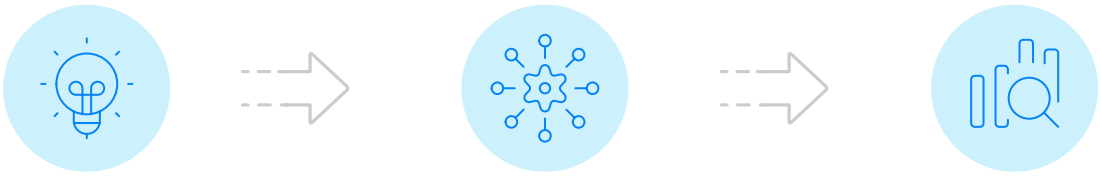
FROM THEORY TO ACTION

9. Start with a 90-day Product Builder pilot

Product Leaders do not need to commit to wholesale organisational restructuring to explore the Product Builder approach.

A more practical starting point is to select an existing cross-functional team and test whether new skills, AI tools and working practices improve its performance.

A 90-day pilot can provide useful evidence before committing to wider change.



DAYS 1 – 30
ESTABLISH

DAYS 31 – 60
APPLY

DAYS 61 – 90
EVALUATE

Days 1 – 30: Establish

Select a customer problem with a clear business objective and a realistic opportunity to learn.

Identify the product, engineering, design and commercial expertise required.

Agree success measures, current performance, responsibilities and the boundaries within which AI can be used.

Establish how much time and effort the team currently spends on development, review, waiting and rework.

Days 31 – 60: Apply

Allow the team to test new ways of working.

Use AI to support customer analysis, prototyping, technical exploration and other appropriate activities.

Encourage product and engineering professionals to work together earlier in the process.

Review customer evidence and technical findings jointly.

Observe whether the approach reduces unnecessary handoffs, improves decision-making or reveals opportunities that would otherwise have been missed.

Days 61 – 90: Evaluate

Compare performance with the initial baseline.

Assess whether the team has improved learning speed, development effectiveness or customer outcomes.

Include the full cost of work, including review, rework, specialist support and ongoing operating requirements.

Where commercial outcomes have not yet emerged, distinguish early indicators from demonstrated benefits.

Decide whether to expand, adapt or stop the approach.

A successful pilot should produce evidence about which practices work, where they work and what is required to repeat them.

FROM THEORY TO ACTION

Suggested pilot scorecard

Area	What to measure
Development economics	Total effort and cost, including review and rework
Speed	Time to test an assumption and deliver a dependable solution
Customer value	Adoption, time to first value and customer outcomes
Commercial performance	Revenue, retention, cost-to-serve or other relevant measures
Team effectiveness	Waiting time, handoffs, decision speed and quality
Risk and quality	Defects, reliability, security and operational readiness

Not every measure will be applicable or observable within 90 days. The important point is to establish what evidence would justify further investment.

The objective is not to prove that the Product Builder concept works everywhere. It is to establish whether it can improve performance within your organisation.



FIVE QUESTIONS FOR PRODUCT LEADERS

What should Product Leaders do next?

The rise of the Product Builder raises some important questions about how organisations will develop and deliver products over the next few years.

There is no reason to assume that every organisation should adopt the same team structure, job titles or technology.

A small software business developing a new product faces different challenges from an established enterprise operating complex platforms in a regulated market.

Nevertheless, the direction of change deserves serious attention.

AI is making it easier to explore and develop product solutions. That creates opportunities to reduce costs, improve responsiveness and test more ideas.

It also places greater importance on selecting the right opportunities, coordinating work effectively and ensuring that investment produces measurable value.

Five questions worth discussing with your leadership team

1. **Are our product and engineering teams organised around customer problems or functional handoffs?**
   Where do responsibilities, approvals or skills gaps create unnecessary delays and additional cost?
2. **Are we measuring AI's contribution to commercial outcomes or simply individual productivity?**
   Can we demonstrate improvements in development economics, customer adoption, revenue or operating efficiency?
3. **Are our product teams working from shared evidence and clear objectives?**
   Or are we allowing AI to accelerate disconnected activities across product, engineering, design and go-to-market functions?
4. **Are we developing the capabilities needed for AI-enabled product development?**
   Do our teams have the technical understanding, customer knowledge and commercial judgement required to make effective decisions?
5. **Where could we test a Product Builder approach within the next 90 days?**
   What would constitute convincing evidence that the approach deserves wider adoption?

A final perspective

The rise of the Product Builder should not be viewed simply as a prediction about the future of the Product Manager role.

It represents a broader opportunity to reconsider how organisations combine customer understanding, technical expertise and commercial judgement.

The potential benefits are substantial: lower development costs, faster learning, more effective teams and better allocation of product investment.

But none of these benefits is automatic.

The organisations that gain most from AI may not be those that build the most software. They may be those that become better at deciding what is worth building, delivering it efficiently and demonstrating the value it creates.

That is the challenge for Product Leaders.

ABOUT THE PRODUCT LEADERS ALLIANCE

The Product Leaders Alliance is a community for senior product professionals, focused on sharing experience, research and practical perspectives on the challenges facing product leadership.

Our aim is to help Product Leaders make better decisions, develop stronger teams and improve the commercial contribution of their product organisations.

productleadersalliance.com

Research and acknowledgements

This leadership briefing has been developed by the Product Leaders Alliance, drawing on *The Rise of the Product Builder* (Tarigo Product Management, September 2026), alongside the research referenced below.

The leadership implications and recommendations represent the PLA's interpretation of the emerging changes in product management and development.

Principal sources

1. Products That Count and Mighty Capital (2026), *The 2026 CPO Insights Report: From Builder to Investor — The New Product Mandate*. Research covering more than 1,500 Chief Product Officers.
2. Google DORA (2025), *State of AI-assisted Software Development* research and the DORA AI Capabilities Model.
3. Google DORA (March 2026), *Balancing AI Tensions: Moving from AI Adoption to Effective SDLC Use*.
4. METR (July 2025), *Measuring the Impact of Early-2025 AI on Experienced Open-Source Developer Productivity,* and February 2026 follow-up on measurement limitations.
5. Tarigo Product Management (September 2026), The Rise of the Product Builder: *How AI Is Reshaping Product Management, Product Development and the Organisations Behind Them*.

© 2026 Product Leaders Alliance

PRODUCT LEADERS ALLIANCE

productleadersalliance.com



In association with

tarigo