

How to Get 11X Productivity Improvement in Product Development

By Bob Norton



**This is a Sample Chapter From a Book In the
Secrets of a Serial Entrepreneur™ Series**

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**How to Get 11X Productivity Improvement
in Product Development**

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**Here Are Some Simple Ideas That Can
Greatly Improve Productivity**

Product development management is more an art than a science, and because I have run many product development groups simultaneously, with a very high launch success rate, I have been asked many times what the key elements for success are! This is not easy to answer, as there are hundreds of small things that make success, not just a few large ones. Although, most examples I quote are about technology product design and software products, the ideas apply to almost all team product development efforts. Many of these ideas were pioneered and used very effectively by “skunkworks” facilities like Lockheed in the 1960s developing the world fastest and highest flying product aircraft. This plane proved to be twenty or more years ahead of its time and 30 years later still held world records, even though it was designed with slide rules, not computers.

**“You can employ men
and hire hands to
work *for* you, but you
must win their hearts
to have them work
with you.”
—Tiorio**

Due to my previous technical background as an engineer, software architect and CTO, prior to becoming CEO, I have always been deeply involved in product development, no matter what title I held, as CEO, VP or just software engineer. Product development is often where the rubber hits the road and ultimately a company is made or broken by the amount of value the product delivers to its customers.

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Product Development and the Mythical Man-Month

In one position, at a small company as "Vice President of Engineering" I wore the hats of Chief Architect, Engineering team manager (times 3), Product Manager, Product Designer and Lead Programmer. Wearing all these hats can be both fun and difficult, but it takes the idea of the Mythical Man Month to the extreme, by cutting out the need for huge and inefficient communications overhead between many different people. This can pay huge dividends in time-to-market and quality, and it is a great early-stage strategy, but for the long term it is not for anyone who wants a life. Most often these functions must be spread over several individuals with strong working relationships and a system of constant communications and shared philosophy. There must be total agreement on the target, or ideal customer, and the unique selling proposition, or that value you can offer that competitors cannot.

**“I hear and I forget.
I see and I
remember. I do and
I understand.”
- Chinese Proverb**

In my earlier career scenario, with me sharing all these roles, these communications could happen instantly in one head, instead of through many emails, meetings and other documents oozing with selling efforts to convince everyone of something which is totally obvious to you because you have virtually all the information in one head. Sometimes, even if your way is not the absolute best, this amazing leap in efficiency makes it the best from an economic, speed and competitive standpoint. If you are lucky enough to find someone capable of doing all these jobs for the first product release you should count your blessings and leverage it to the maximum. This alone can cut in half, your time-to-market and may only require one person to work 60-hour weeks. Of course, you become totally dependent on that person and if he or she is hit by a bus or decides to leave, you are in big trouble. So you need a real solid relationship with this person and a serious long-term commitment from them. This is best accomplished by a

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strong personal relationship and a long-term compensation plan like stock options or profit sharing that is earned over time.

At this particular company, we had not two or three times the average development productivity, but ELEVEN times the average development productivity! Now that's competitive advantage that impacts cost, speed and no doubt also product quality. So what other things did we do to boost productivity?

Firstly, let me say I am a big believer in small development teams being far more efficient than large ones. Believe it or not, it is a fact that in most products (especially software) 3 to 6 really good programmers can beat a team of 100 programmers, at some corporate giant, every single time. We could argue about why, and waste many evenings debating the impact from attitude, people quality, environment, motivation, lowered overheads and just plain simplicity, but in the end, it really doesn't matter why -- what matters that it is a fact. Each of these factors has an impact that is not additive, but multiplicative! So a small team is the very key to high productivity. In fact, if you have a big product, the most bang for your buck will come from breaking people into small teams, with very clearly defined goals that do not overlap at all, and where documents can be used as the interface with all objectives clearly defined and agreed to, at the very beginning.

Money has almost nothing to do with results after a certain point:

Orville and Wilbur Wright spent about \$3,000 developing their Wright Flyer over several years. A competitor spent over \$70,000 in mostly government grant money and not only did they not succeed, but they also killed people during crashes in the process.

Product development and innovation are not about money, but about the quality and creativity of a few people on a team.

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Insist on Proper Design Time

One critical thing you need for amazing productivity is a development cycle that includes sufficient “forced” design time (and discipline). This is so critical, and exactly the opposite of what most programmers and engineers want to do. Most want to build something first and ask questions later. For programmers it's what they like to do - sit in front of a computer alone without anyone to challenge their ideas and thinking, and then ultimately worry about coordinating their work's merger with everyone else's work later – when it is far to late. Unfortunately, by then it is much too late to come up with money and time saving ideas that can literally cut development time by half or more.

Although this is somewhat counter-intuitive, allowing insufficient design-discipline will double to triple your development costs and time, and pretty much guarantee a poor product too. A good rule of thumb is 1/3 design, 1/3 coding and 1/3 testing. Amazingly the type of product, platform or tools used really does not matter that much, this ratio still applies. This is about efficient human interaction and communications, not about the tools used to build something.

Select Your Time Frame for Development Before Your Feature List

Another rule of thumb that is a **MUST** is, to pick a fixed time for development that is efficient, not place a number on the total desired feature list, then trim the release features to that cycle. This will vary with the product-type, but is ALWAYS less than the designers want by at least a factor of two. The fact is, people do not need this much time; they just WANT this much time so life is easy without any pressure or chance of “failure”. However, failure is missing a market-window or

“Did you realize that approximately 42% of the average company's intellectual capital exists only within its employees’ heads?”

—Thomas Brailsford

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opportunity, not being a month late for a 6-month cycle that they wanted a year to do. Customers are only willing to accept a certain number of upgrades anyway, usually not more than two per year so 6-months is a good timeframe for a software product development cycle that is in rapid change. I would, of course, specifically exclude web sites and other more simple projects that allow very rapid change and testing cycles. These should have much, much shorter development cycles, sometimes days not months.

The major benefit of this tactic is that it will force clear prioritization of features and benefits that matter to customers all by itself, and will probably at least DOUBLE productivity.

Generally, the time available in any plan will be eaten up, plus more for unexpected problems and critical features that come up during the development phase. However, it is important to have a deadline that creates a real sense of urgency. When this does not exist, engineers and designers will spend a lot more time than they should on making "perfect" details that do not matter at all to customers or sales. This will cost four times as much and most often will provide very little value, to a small subset of customers and often no one, but the builders of the product can even see the difference. A good test for this is to ask a few real customers, that you consider "average", if they would pay \$X more to have that feature in the next release. Most customers will say yes to any "new" feature idea, but if they know it will cost them money they will give a more real answer indicating if they really want it and will really use that feature.

A Fact of Life - Getting It Out The Door

The fact of the matter is that no product is ever perfect and you must make compromises that will meet the bulk of the customer needs that are critical to your differentiation and customer base. If Microsoft waited for Windows to be stable, it would have

**“Few great men could
pass personnel.”**

—Paul Goodman

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been at least 1995 before the 1987 version of Windows 1.0 was released as Windows 95. To make this happen you need to have a real schedule, a sense of urgency and a combination of both positive and negative motivators that are consistent across all product-cycles. I like to offer a bonus, both financial and emotional, to all the key people. This can be as simple as a launch party with sweat shirts and a nice dinner out, or even a percentage of sales during a fixed period after the launch going into a pool for the developers. If the launch slips the timeframe for this bonus, DOES NOT! and they lose this financial incentive if the schedule slips. Of course if you decide you need added features in the release during the cycle then you should also slip that bonus window too, as that is not in their control. Too many companies constantly send the message that they do not care about schedules by constantly pushing the schedule out.

Recently Gillette announced the new “Mach 3” blade. They claim to have spent about \$1 billion dollars developing this “new” product. It has one more blade, (an amazing leap of logic from two), and a better pivoting head, plus some more space between blades for easier cleaning. I am sure there are many other improvements and stuff we don’t see, but BE SERIOUS ONE BILLION DOLLARS! WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? How could a company possibly spend this much money on minor and fairly obvious innovations like this? The answer is they have a huge and inefficient bureaucracy instead of a small efficient product development team with full responsibility and the authority to “make it happen”. Moving anything forward in that organization has to be a huge challenge and at glacial speed. Shame on the CEO there for not understanding product development and how to really make it happen. They could have developed 100 really new products with that budget.

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**Proper Customer Research Must Be Completed
Before Design Starts**

With existing products that are in the field, research is much easier than with new products. You will generally have a broad array of customer requests and champion customers to interview, thereby, making prioritization of features easier.

"Research" is a sticky issue with a new product, and there is a talent to knowing what to listen to and what to ignore, or put a lower priority on. It is critical that the research person understands the target customer's ultimate priorities, not necessarily what they say they want to accomplish, which may be an intermediate step you can make obsolete. The customers' workflow processes around the used of any product must be very well understood by the designers to offer breakthrough true solutions. To understand this you

must really work with the customer one-on-one, to prioritize what they want most. Surprisingly many product builders never meet with a customer during the process. This must be encouraged and managed closely. It is difficult enough to design good products without getting all your information through several layers of filters or people who really understand neither the technology nor the customer's problems well. Some direct contract is a critical for any major advances to occur.



The B-1 Bomber and F-14 Fighter
These are two very different products, both very successful at one thing, but they would be horrible at the other's job. Setting clear objectives and priorities early enables success in a defined target niche of functions for a target group of customers. Trying to be everything to everybody is destined to failure.

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Feature Review and the Dreaded Product Committee

Product committee meetings to review proposed top features are a necessary evil. I hate bureaucracy as much as anyone, but even in an early-stage company structure around this process is absolutely necessary. For an efficient process, there must be a wild-ass guess ("WAG") cost estimate placed on each feature at the beginning to start the process. In most cases, this can be a person-day estimate for each feature to include all design, development and testing of the feature. This translates into a dollar cost, which is important for everyone to see. People might request features thinking they are minor, but when they find out they could cost \$50,000 or more to implement they would not even dream of asking for it. Given this knowledge, salespeople, customers and product managers will almost always choose to have ten other smaller features costing \$5,000 instead. And as a result you now have ten selling features to get more customers, instead of one that many people will not care about.

A feedback loop on cost and time is critically important in this process, and it should be considered an iterative process, not a one-time estimate, with each step getting closer to reality as development proceeds.

“Management by objective works if you know the objective. Ninety percent of the time you don't.”

—Peter Drucker

Place time-limits on each release definition process and advertise this limited window of opportunity to advocate for new product features in time to collect all input. It is critical that top-level people attend this meeting from each department initially. They should understand this is their major opportunity to advocate for new features. When that window is shut it should take an “act of congress”, or at least

the CEO to reopen the product development definition and schedule. Again this must be done very consistently, or you will train people to be lobbying in new features and

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requests constantly during development that have the impact of dramatically impacting overall productivity. This product definition meeting should always include:

1. Customer advocates (normal front-line people who understand customer requirements and have hard data from real customers that is very up to date)
2. The head of engineering
3. The head of QA
4. The head of Operations/customer support
5. The Chief Product Architect or Engineer
6. And YES ideally even the CEO or general manager of the business should be there!

In my experience the best chair for this meeting is the VP of Development and he/she must drive the process and keep it on a schedule. However, this can vary greatly by personalities and skill sets. It could be the Product Management Czar, the VP of Sales or even the CEO. There needs to be a published start-date for design, which is the end-date for this feature review process.

**“You must be the
change you wish to
see in the world.”**

— Gandhi

Defining Objectives And The Design Process

Get everyone on the same page in terms of priorities and objectives for this product release. Everyone involved in development should understand the main objective(s) of every release. Very often these will fit under some theme that is targeted at a particular group of customers or an industry where you are trying to build your competitive advantage.

Design is an iterative process. It can be broken down into 3 steps. Each individual step should cycle until a satisfactory solution is at hand. Try not to ever cycle through all three, it must be done serially to be efficient and produce quality products.

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1. Conceptual Design
2. Preliminary Design
3. Detailed Design

You don't just show up with steel and expect to build a good bridge. Programmers and other designers and engineers do this every day because they want to get right to the "fun" stuff of building, but this is not engineering, it is more like hacking products together.

Conceptual Design is essentially white boarding the high level objectives interactively, with people in the room who can represent various constituencies. This should be a visual process with diagrams and finger pointing to these diagrams, to shortcut lots of words and to instantly be sure you are all talking about the same thing. Often words can be interpreted at multiple levels in the application of something and people will not be connecting and not even realize it. Breaking problems and ideas down into levels, or two to three dimensional problems that fit in diagrams can be a huge help. More than one meeting might be necessary and this should be repeated until everyone can play back the same requirements, and highest-level priorities.

"Quantifying the gap between exemplary and average employees demonstrates the tremendous potential for organizations to increase the performance of their workforces."

—Tom Gilbert

"The productivity gap can be five to ten times, not just 20%, but often managers cannot recognize that the superior employee is solving much larger problems."

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Preliminary design is when you let the engineers go away and come back with initial written design specs to get it on paper. This is a rough draft, or a quick and dirty design to make sure everyone is on the same page. This must be limited to a couple of pages maximum, per person or function. Going from oral to paper will always flush out issues and ideas. Guess what? Different people will come back with very different interpretations of the previous discussions. So this process saves big bucks down the line because these are text changes, not physical product or process changes that can have a much bigger cost and impact. Everything needs to be iterative. This is also where the real magic happens. If your people are meeting constantly, using white boards, smiling and having fun, here this is an indication things are going well. If there are turf wars and personality issues you may need to directly facilitate this process by asking for “updates” on the design or even sitting in on these meetings to decide what is most important from the customers’ perspective. Designers often cannot get into this customer perspective. This is a “forest for the trees” kind of issue and you will need to pull them out constantly by saying “which customer **NEEDs** this?” or “How do we know customers will pay extra for this?” These questions can be a real dose of reality and pull people towards what is really important to the customer, instead of their own biases.

Detailed design is really flushing out the details of **how** everything will work, not what it will do. Each function or requirement may have several levels of design below this, like conceptual, logical, physical, human interface and field level operating parameters allowed. This is a lot of work that will allow validation of the design with customers or customer advocates before coding starts. A “spec-review” and a “Sign off” on each specification is a necessary evil and the last step. Getting the simple documents, or pictures in front of a few customers can be very valuable at this stage, but many customers will be unable to spend the time or really provide good feedback. When you find customers that do this, and represent the interests of the customer-base well, develop those relationships like gold and provide freebies and extra services to these customers to

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keep them really involved. A formal or informal customer board of advisors can easily meet once a year and provide a free ski trip, dinner or other special benefit that makes these people happy to help. If done right this will also help these people to be viewed as thought leaders within their own companies and will help their careers and this can be made clear to them easily.

Other Functions That Need Attention

- 1. Feature List Collection (ongoing process forever)**
- 2. Complaint/Bug list collection and review to set priorities and workarounds**
- 3. Engineering review (WAG) and possible mock-ups of known high priority items (starts while in system test of the previous release)**
- 4. Product Review committee (Limited opportunity for advocates X times/year)**

Rules to Live By

No one, not even the CEO, should go around the "owner" of the product development process, who sets the schedule and controls the features. A CEO might require a new feature for important business reasons, but the owner needs to integrate that into the development cycle and negotiate if and how that impacts the release date. Often when really close to a release date this is so disruptive, as to not be worth it. Alternatively, other features might be removed to stay on schedule if they have not been started.

Complete the design of each component before you begin any development. The rule that you cannot write "one line of code" is critical! This is like pulling teeth, but well worth it. You really need to insist that your programmers act like engineers not hackers. They will quickly see the benefits of this and love it, understanding this is the difference between the amateurs and the professional. After a few cycles they will be wearing on their sleeves like a badge of courage!

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**”Sure, luck means a lot
in football. Not having
a good quarterback is
bad luck.”**

—Don Shula

Change is always difficult and there will be lots of moaning and groaning, but to be a world-class player and have high productivity, you need this type of serious system. Without it, you will spend your life fighting fires and never achieve longer-term objectives and high productivity.

Our [CEO and Entrepreneur Boot Camp](#) seminar and [DVDs](#) discuss this product development process in great detail beyond the scope of this book with a dozen rules that are guaranteed to increase any company’s product development productivity by a large factor, not just a small fraction.

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These books are all written by Bob Norton, a serial entrepreneur for over 25 years and a CEO for more than 15 years. Mr. Norton is one of the leading authorities in the world on entrepreneurship, intrapreneurship and growing businesses rapidly. He has participated in eight startup companies, grown two to over \$100 million in sales and several have dominated their respective markets. He has also worked for two multi-billion dollar corporations running product development efforts. His experience goes across all size companies, and many types of businesses in various industries. During his career Mr. Norton has helped created over \$1 billion in new shareholder value just while at those companies. Mr. Norton provides expertise on growing small and medium size companies more rapidly using eleven different proprietary tools and methodologies for business design, development and optimization, which he has developed over the last fifteen years. Many ideas are also contributed from over 1,000 business books in his personal library. He also runs the premier CEO and Entrepreneur Boot Camp in the U.S. today, which is design to cut years off the learning curve of CEOs and entrepreneurs and turn them into world-class CEOs. This exclusive event teaches practical business design and optimization systems in an intensive 3-day training program for any CEO or entrepreneur.

Mr. Norton has appeared on CNBC, Good Morning America and many other regional and national media like Inc. magazine. He provides advice to entrepreneurs and CEOs through consulting, speaking, writing and seminars. He frequently speaks at corporations, associations, and universities on business topics.

These books are targeted at particular problems and stages of development where early-stage ventures commonly encounter critical issues while moving from raw startup with an idea to becoming an established company. They are guaranteed to improve any

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Other Available Products to Help Your Business Grow More Rapidly

business's chances of success dramatically. They can be downloaded immediately and the ideas and systems put into action the same day. Unlike hardcover books, that need to be a certain size to justify the printing, distribution and retail markups, these books will not have lots of redundant information, essentially showcasing the same basic ideas five different ways. They are packed with totally unique content that comes from the experience of a real serial entrepreneur, not just an author who did some academic research, but practical advice and systems for CEOs and entrepreneurs proven to work over two decades. The philosophies and systems used in each are compatible so that, as a set, they will create a framework for successful and rapid business growth.

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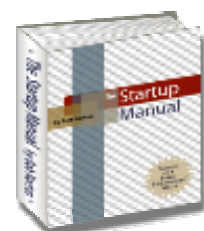
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The Art and Science of Business Design details how to design, plan and manage each of any enterprise's key disciplines - Sales, Marketing, Finance, Operation and Product Development. As a CEO and Entrepreneur, you need to know how these departments interact and even compete. You need to know how to recruit, hire, motivate and manage the best people in each discipline. You must also know how to get them to work together so that everybody is on the same page.

In "The Art and Science of Business Design" you will learn to:

- 1. Design and position a business for more sustainable competitive advantage and higher barriers to entry.**

Other Available Products to Help Your Business Grow More Rapidly

2. Optimize your business model for minimum risk and capital investment.
3. Better define the exact skills you need on your team and learn how to select people and interview for skills you do not have yourself.
4. Raise capital in any market from the best sources without giving the company away.
5. Inject entrepreneurial spirit into ANY organization, large or small, and improve product development productivity by a factor of FIVE times the average or more.
6. Develop a marketing, communications and messaging plan, and a marketing department, that is accountable to a return on investment.
7. Develop and improve your corporate vision to better attract investors, employees and customers.
8. Plan, design and manage a sales department and select strategies, tactics and channels that will work for your business.
9. Hire the best people in every area and understand what personality types work best in each business area to create superior results.
10. Adjust your management style, risk, appetite and executive decisions based on your company's stage of development as it grows from a raw startup to a significant business.
11. Manage employees and develop them into more valuable assets for your company's benefit and theirs.
12. And much, much more than what we can list here.

If you are an entrepreneur intent on growing your business to \$50 million or more in sales, you really can't afford to miss this unique event.

Admission includes:

- A sure-fire business and career-booster that is not available anywhere else. The skills developed in this seminar will allow managers to move up in any organization
- A complete system that will bring high-growth to any business
- More cutting edge, how-to content than you'll find in some 3 to 5 day seminars
- Reference materials you'll use over and over again, including a complete 350+ page manual that includes all the slides, handouts and tools presented in the seminar
- A BONUS CD-ROM containing the key tools, forms and templates that could save thousands of dollars in expenses. (This is a \$499 value sold separately)

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- Each attendee will receive one hour of consulting from our President and Founder, Bob Norton, at our offices in Milford Massachusetts. This is a \$400 value
- An e-book from our "Secrets of a Serial Entrepreneur Series". Four titles all written by Mr. Norton- even more will be available shortly
- Breakfast, lunch and snack break both days
- A 100% money-back guarantee (see web site for details)
- Free parking.