

Taming Timelines: Navigating the Question of "When Will It Be Done?"

Michael Cinquino (00:00)

Welcome everyone to episode five of Ascendle Unscripted. This episode is entitled Taming Timelines, Navigating the question of quote, When Will it be Done? And I've learned that that "it" inside of when will it be done can also be put in some form of quotation as I've learned and we'll talk about here shortly. I'd to introduce our speakers. We have Susannah Mitchell, VP of Operations at Ascendle. And we also have Dan O'Keefe, Chief Product Officer at PCMI.

Welcome, Dan. Welcome, Susannah. Of course. I would like to just dive right in on theme one, defining "it" and its importance. Dan, we talked previously about you emphasizing that the key to answering when will it be done starts with actually defining what "it" is. So the question I have is, how can organizations ensure everyone has a shared understanding of what it really is?

Dan O'Keefe (00:34) Thank you, Michael.

Susannah Mitchell (00:34) Thank you.

Dan O'Keefe (00:59)

Yeah, that's a really good question. I think when we ask the question, "when will it be done?" Most people focus on the done, right? The done part, the timeline. But I've learned that actually the defining what the "it" is first becomes just as important. And it really depends, I think, on the maturity of the company and how they're looking at their software development lifecycle. So I don't know if any of the listeners are going to be aware, back in, I think, 20 years ago, Regis McKenna came up with the definition of something called the whole product.

And the whole product is everything necessary for the customer to realize the value of their investment. It's typically when we talk about a product, we talk about the core product, the software, the thing that delivers the actual value to be realized. But the whole product is everything else that's required to unlock that value. And a really great example is actually the iPhone. So the iPhone is the iPhone. It's the thing that we all use. But if you didn't have a carrier, if you didn't have the App Store, if you didn't have a case, if you didn't have a charger, you couldn't use it.



So the whole product is all of those things. So software companies, when they start to look at software, tend to talk about what's the piece of software I need to develop and when will it be done. The right question is when will the customer get value from that software and what are all the things we need to do to get to that value and when will that be done? And that's the better question, that when you start looking at the definition of done,

You have to look at the whole product definition, all the parts and pieces of the organization working together to get to completion so the customer can get the value from the software. And we're not just building software and putting it on a shelf and nobody's using it.

Michael Cinquino (02:32)

Dan, thanks for that. Susannah, continuing the thought somewhat on what Dan discussed about how "it" is not just software, but the value it creates. Can you talk a little bit about how teams can effectively shift their focus from delivering software to delivering business outcomes?

Susannah Mitchell (02:49)

Yeah. I think, you know, going back to what Dan said, I think it comes back to a really clear definition of "it", of what it is you're trying to achieve in terms of what the customer is going to get. And more than just defining that in terms of the customer, it's making sure all of the team members, including the folks who are writing the code to build it understand why you're building, what you're building, and what that value is that the customer will achieve by using what you're building, and that that just stays forefront in the communications about the project. So making sure everyone is always aligned to what it is that you're going to be building.

And then to build on that, it's making sure to be really clear about what you'll be delivering to the market at any given time and that the entire organization knows what they need to do to be ready for that because there's work, as Dan mentioned, outside of just the development effort to be able to actually deliver that value to the market.

Michael Cinquino (03:58)

Thanks for that, Susannah. One of the themes that continues to come up on Ascendle Unscripted is communication. No matter what we're talking about, that always seems to be a predominant theme. Dan, I'd love to ask you about communication breakdowns in this process. They seem to happen frequently. They seem to come up a lot, and certainly when teams are unclear about the value they're creating. So the question I have is, why do you think this happens? And how can organizations address their communication gaps or challenges?



Dan O'Keefe (04:30)

I think it's, who was it? It was a George Bernard Shaw said America and England are two countries separated by a common language. I think a lot of that goes on in organizations. So you have the business arm and the business is out selling, they're out driving new value. They want to bring new things to market and you have the software arm, right? The product and the software arm, which is really around "how do I build high quality software?" And the problem is if you don't bring those two sides together the right way, if they don't really understand each other's point of view, you end up in a place where software says my goal is to build, or sorry, development says my goal is to build high performing software, not to bring value to customers.

And meanwhile, the business is saying, I want to go out and sell all this stuff, but I don't know if we can deliver it or not. So what you need is an ongoing communication strategy that talks about what is it we want to bring to market. You're really aligning the strategic goals. This is what people talk about all the time, of course, aligning the strategic goals to how that software is going to be delivered. And the function of product in the middle of that is to translate those business goals to the value to be delivered then constantly communicate it.

And you need executive presence in that communication as well, so that you're not looking at just the next thing in backlog to be built. You're talking about, what are all the things in backlog that I need to build in order to get to a certain value point in the marketplace? And if you don't reinforce that every single week, then the development team, but no fault of their own, by the way, will slide back into, I've got the next thing in my backlog that I need to build, and I'll move on.

One of the characteristics you can see, by the way, when this happens, is product might come to the table and say, we need to build this sort of capability because Hilton signed up for it. And if the language is we're building this pattern of which Hilton is the first consumer, that's a good communication pattern. If the pattern is this is the Hilton feature, you've got a bad communication pattern going on. And so that's a good way to distinguish between whether you're communicating well or whether you're not communicating enough.

Michael Cinquino (06:25)

Dan, can you give me another example of that Hilton distinction when you make the distinction between the product or the feature? Is that what it was?

Dan O'Keefe (06:31)

Yeah, it really is. So I can give you an example that actually happened to both Susannah and I when we were working together. We wanted to build a data pipeline, A data feed from one platform to another using industry standard technologies. And that really was the feature. The feature was build this epic over time. And we had a customer pay for it.



And so we wanted to build a data pipeline with Hilton as the first customer. And what it turned into is we were building the Hilton data feed. And because of that, a lot of short-term decisions were made. Every time we met with a customer, we had changed the requirements to be exactly what they needed instead of looking at it from what's our architecture and pattern and how do we make sure that Hilton can consume it. And so decision-making starts to shift. The definition of "it" starts to shift.

And the definition of value shifts to be a single customer focus versus a market focus. And again, I'm not faulting the development team on that. I'm faulting that there was a lack of ongoing reinforcement of the underlying driver of the value proposition around it.

Michael Cinquino (07:42)

Adjacent to this, Susannah, can you talk a little bit on one of my favorite terms, define and align? How can teams define and align the definitions? Because it sounds like from what Dan was saying, there can be different definitions of done. What does it look like and how does one or a team organization define and align?

Susannah Mitchell (07:49)

Yeah, I think it comes down to creating a practice around communication. And Dan was touching on this a little bit. When it comes to defining and aligning, say, what the definition of done is for a particular value delivery to the market, I think it's about working across the organization and bringing together everybody that is going to have to contribute to that value delivery to define what they need to do to be able to meet that commitment. So rather than it being a dictated date that, okay, we're going to get this done, it needs to be a conversation where the entire organization is leaning in and those done definitions are built together.

Michael Cinquino (08:57)

Got it. Dan, you have anything to add to that?

Dan O'Keefe (09:01)

No, I think that's actually exactly right. It has to be from the bottom up. We have, or usually have used the concept of three different dates for done. One is what we just call the target date. That's from product without any input whatsoever. That's the date that we would like something to be done. Now quite often in companies that becomes the date, by the way. That's another communication path that needs to be reinforced. That's not the date. That's just the desired date, target date.

The second is the forecast date, and that's when the development teams had a chance to go through it and build out the backlog and look at the work they have to say, we think we're to be done by a certain date.

Then you get the commit date. And the commit date is when the rest of the organization, if you're doing this properly, if you're really doing a proper kind of operational go to market,



the rest of the organization participates in that conversation and says, I need to build a run book for implementation. I need to get my marketing campaign ready. I need to train support. And for all that, we need the forecast date plus say three weeks and that becomes the commit date and when the team picks the commit date it's much easier to drive them to rally around it and do whatever is necessary to hit it.

Michael Cinquino (10:06)

Susannah, do you have anything to add to what Dan just laid out?

Susannah Mitchell (10:11)

Yeah, I think there's a really important concept in there that gets to kind of the core of what we're talking about here, which is how to navigate timeline conversations. And that's this idea of a shared language of what certain dates are across the organization. So Dan was mentioning different types of dates, you know, and only the last type when everybody was bought in was a committed date.

I think organizations get themselves in trouble when dates are dictated without that type of buy-in and communication. And it is in the creation of the shared language and the shared date types that you can navigate it. You know, when product asks for something that target, everybody knows that's an ask, right? Because you have aligned on the shared language of dates. But then when that committed date gets captured, everybody knows what that means too. Everybody knows that means we're all in and we've done the due diligence to know that this is feasible and that we can make it happen. So I think that's a super key piece of all of this is creating the terminology and educating the organization on what it means so everybody can have a spot at that table.

Michael Cinquino (11:27)

Can you expand a little bit on that Susannah, meaning into that shared language? Because it sounded like what I got from you is that this date means one thing to one person and another thing to another. So there's some sort of misalignment with expectation when that date arrives.

Susannah Mitchell (11:45)

Yeah, absolutely. What I've seen at certain organizations is that you go in and product will say, we're going to launch this in March of next year. And then that's it. Everybody is working towards one date, right? And what you've missed there is, well, the question of feasibility, can the delivery teams even do it by then? Does the rest of the organization commit to all of the work that's needed to actually get it into a customer's hand? Is it prioritized? So I think the key here is that it can't be dictated by one portion of the organization. It needs to be contributed to by everybody and validated that they can in fact do their portion of that value delivery before a date is committed to.

Michael Cinquino (12:36)

Dan, I feel like you have something to add there.



Dan O'Keefe (12:40)

Yeah, sorry. So I actually live what Susannah just described is exactly right. And I live it because as Chief Product Officer, if I go out and say, hey, I'd like to get this by April, everybody suddenly takes that as the date. And so I do spend a lot of my time, A, not picking dates, and B, making sure that people understand that that would be nice to have. It's a preferred day, but the team needs to do the due diligence to do it. It absolutely will get picked up and run with if you're not very careful about making sure that it's not perceived that way. So going back to Susannah's point of a shared language, if the language is understood, that a target date is just an ask, then we don't have to constantly worry about it being misinterpreted.

Michael Cinquino (13:19)

Well, it sounds like also there's going back to what is "it". It sounds like there can be some mystery around that end date as to what "it" is. And it sounds like that could depend upon the department or who's working on it.

Susannah Mitchell (13:35)

Yeah, I think I can add a little insight there. So "it" can vary by the maturity life cycle of the product itself. So "it" looks very different, for example, for a pilot for something than for a general availability launch. And "it" looks very different in terms of the organizational lift across all the various departments to reach that. I think it does, in addition to defining the what it is that you're trying to build in terms of what value you're delivering to the customer, how much of it you're trying to build and how you're going to get it into a customer's hand is also part of that.

Michael Cinquino (14:19)

How does agile find its way into this? Agile practices and execution. Is there a relationship? Not some, a lot? I'll leave that for either one of you.

Dan O'Keefe (14:32) You want to go first Susannah?

Susannah Mitchell (14:33)

Sure, yeah, I think I can get us some hot water here. I think that agile, when done well, can support this. It can support this good communication around timeframes and expectations, especially this idea of doing it in the right time frame to create an environment where you can make pivots and changes, but also all be driving towards the same goal. But I also think that when not done well, agile can actually get in the way of timeline communications. In fact, what I've seen in some instances is a lack of you know, ability to commit to a date or just kind of a fear of committing to a date because instead of looking farther out, folks are working in these two week sprints. And so there's kind of this fear, if you will, of date commitment when agile isn't done properly.



Michael Cinquino (15:44) Do you have anything to add to that?

Dan O'Keefe (15:46)

I always have things to add, Michael. Thank you for asking. So I think if we look at extremes in how organizations run, first of all, if you're operating an internal platform, so your customer is just the company you're working in, I think agile is totally fine. Don't get me wrong, it works absolutely great. When you're dealing in a commercial software company that needs to support outside customers, it changes somewhat. So if the only thing you're doing is looking at the next most important thing to build, then you're in a pure software life cycle and you're not really connected through to what's really going on the market. When you're in software sales, you will get things coming to you from customers, from market needs, from other things where you don't sometimes have great control over the scope and the timeline that the customer's operating in. And so two things then have to happen. One, you have to be able to define what the release looks like in a way that you can agilely work towards it, but you still have to have some scope defined.

You can't just say, I'm going to keep going until I'm done. And then you can track against that scope so you can get some sense of progress. And then as importantly, going back to the whole date conversation, your business team needs to be mature in how it engages customers on requests. So it can't be a promise. It has to be a process that says, we're going to bring that set of requirements in. We're going to create a BRD. It's a little waterfalley, I know, but we're going to create a BRD. We're then going to engage the development team to help us scope it out.

We're going to provide an estimate back to the customer. That estimate might now be the forecast date, if you remember going back to what I talked about earlier. Still not the commit date, but developers had a chance to break it down. And so if your business arm can be mature and your software team can be connected to those conversations, actually agile works just fine in that sort of situation.

Michael Cinquino (17:35)

Susannah, do you have anything to add to that?

Susannah Mitchell (17:37)

Yeah, I think a lot of times when teams are delivering in an agile mode, there can be trepidation or fear of a timeline. But when you actually zoom out a bit, I think that there are agile frameworks, specifically scaled agile, I think, does this very well, that address this problem of wanting to work in the shortened sprint cycles but needing a trajectory that's far enough out for the business to make decisions. And that's the balancing of a lean business case and then quarterly planning to get farther out targets. And then of course, those two week iterations to make sure that everything's being done. So again, I do think that timelines are absolutely supported by good agile practice. And there are frameworks that even help with that.



The best balance I've seen is that upfront lean business case, and I do mean lean planning that can help set those realistic targets. Because let's remember, targets are based on assumptions by the product team of how many customers will have received value by a certain amount of time. And that's necessary to set those goals initially and to make those investment decisions. But then balancing that, not doing all just upfront planning, balancing that with on cadence revisiting of those goals on quarterly basis and then on a sprint basis to see how you're doing against them.

Dan O'Keefe (19:08)

Yeah, I think there's an area that we probably should talk about, which is resource commitment, right? Because again, this is the assumption that we're bringing distinct value to market that we want to enable and get everybody up and running. And of course, you can't go to market if you can't install the product, if you can't support the product, if you can't do those things. But to get ready for those things takes time. Your resources must have a certain amount of capacity set aside to be able to work on those things. And if they don't, you won't get them and then actually you're not going to be selling very many customers.

You figure all that stuff out at the first implementation, which is not great for anybody. Well, in order to get that capacity set aside, this whole thing has to become part of the DNA of your organization. It has to become part of the culture of your organization, and it has to be supported by the executive team. So it's easy to talk about value. It's easy to talk about the whole product. But if you don't commit your organization to doing it the right way, repetitively, with the right level of resource assignment, it's just not going to happen.

Michael Cinquino (20:12)

So there's two purviews of this topic, it seems like. There's the high-level kind of a helicopter view, which I think, Dan, you've got some input on. And then there's the tactical. Susannah, we've talked previously about the what, kind of where the rover meets the road. Dan, could you walk us through that helicopter view? And then Susannah, can you kind of pick up where things get implemented in the day-to-day moment to moment?

Dan O'Keefe (20:41)

Sure. So product owns the success of all of this in many respects, right? We're responsible for making sure the value gets delivered. We're responsible for making sure the organization is aligned and communicated to you in order to achieve that value. And historically, if you go back 10, 15, 20 years, we would give that to the product manager and just say, product manager, go get your product in market. And they would go and talk to everybody and do it. But organizations have become matrix, cross-functional. It's a lot more challenging to do it that way.

And so what we typically implement, and I think is now becoming generally an industry standard, is this concept of product ops, which is a team or one or more people that own this centrally, both in terms of execution and reporting on it. And Susannah, I know you've



worked in this sort of environment for a while, do want to talk a little about the makeup of those teams and what they do?

Susannah Mitchell (21:31)

Yeah, sure. I think it's important to note that it's usually not just one person, right? That's making these commitments and a silo. The key piece of this might be one person owning it. Product ops teams don't have to be huge; can just be one person that's in charge of making sure everyone's aligned. But the coordination, communication and commitment, that is a team that's made up of folks from across the organization.

From your support team, from your sales team, from your development team, maybe your cloud team. All organizations look different in terms of what's needed, but the key is it's people that are in those parts of the business and those business units that understand the work that's needed to be done to get a change into the hands of a customer, the value delivered to the customer and what their part of the organization needs to deliver on to get it.

And so I think an effective product ops team, or release team as we've called it before, is a group of those folks that are representative of their, you know, areas of the organization that can come together and make an effective plan and commit to getting that work done for their portion of the organization. And I think to make it really effective, it needs to be on cadence, regular communication. It needs to be individuals who have enough autonomy and authority to own date commitments for their business unit.

Michael Cinquino (23:07)

Susannah, the one question that I think maybe we haven't covered is when should an organization invest in product operations? And when should they not, maybe?

Susannah Mitchell (23:20)

Yeah, so Dan and I might have differing opinions on this. I think it's once you get beyond one product or once you get to a point where commitments need to be made across those business unit lines, then it should be a focus of somebody, whether that's their whole role depends on the size of the organization, the amount of products this person is trying to drive, but it should be as soon as you need to work cross-functionally. It needs to be a responsibility and then as you grow it can become a role. Dan, I don't know if you have a differing opinion.

Michael Cinquino (23:57) Yeah, so should you invest in something and when should you not?

Dan O'Keefe (24:01)

You know, it's a really good question. And I think actually I mostly agree with what Susannah said. I, when I think through some of the companies I've worked for, sometimes you're a startup and you're just trying to get product to market and your whole organization



is acting like product ops because you're all just driving to get that one product in front of that one customer and make it work. I think having more than one product for sure.

I think product maturity is the second one when you start having to do more general releases– or sorry, general availability releases. If you're starting to look at alternative products that you want to pilot, those are the sorts of times that you want to do it. But I also go back to my comment earlier on about consistent communication, making it part of your culture. If you leave it too long, if your software company is really still driven by the next opportunity that you're closing, which is now setting the date and your team just has to deliver against that date, it's going to be harder to instill that culture and that communication that's necessary to grow and scale. About a scalability, it's really all about scalability at that point. So you have to find that right point in which to introduce it. And I wouldn't wait too long. And a lot of it really will come down to the quality of your executive team, your CPO, and how that CPO communicates to help start to put those pieces in place.

Michael Cinquino (25:27)

So taking that same thought process into engaging with customers and how to engage with them at each different stage, can you talk about the different roles that customers play depending upon where the product is in maturity and how organizations can effectively engage customers at each stage from pilot all the way to a mature product.

Dan O'Keefe (25:58)

Yes Susannah do you want to take that one?

Susannah Mitchell (26:02)

So yeah, I think that in addition to having the mature executive team, having a good products ops focus and strong product management can help tune the communication and get the customer to kind of come along for that journey and help set those dates and set those expectations based on what the organization can deliver instead of having it be the other way around with the customer saying, have to hit this date. Maybe that's not reasonable.

Customers have commit dates that they have to hit, right? Certain market drivers mean particular dates, but I think it comes back to the central theme that we were talking about before, which is solid communication that brings folks that need to contribute to that success to the table. So that's not being dictated by any one entity in this case, not just dictated by the customer needs to be a reality factor on the organization part. And vice versa, that pressure from the customer might help the organization say, well, what can we do and what can we get into the hands by then, et cetera.

I think there's no specific time to say when exactly you need product ops, but I think that there are things to look out for that might be an indication that it's needed. And I think one of the key ones is when there's an erosion of trust between the various business units in



the organization. So if sales doesn't trust that the development will be done on time and therefore isn't going to sell it then it's probably an indicator that you need some sort of focus on this cross business unit organization. Or if even there's that tension between product and development, there's probably some shared language that needs to be developed, some coordination and on cadence communication between those groups that can be managed through a products ops type of role to help alleviate those tensions and get everybody on the same page.

Michael Cinquino (28:17)

Susannah, I have a question. Can product ops be revved up and rev down? To the example that you gave, when trust is very, very high and things are moving quickly, does it serve you to play a little bit more hands off? Whereas if you feel that trust may have been eroded a little bit, it's time to ramp it up. Is that feasible? Number one. Two, if so, how do you do that?

Susannah Mitchell (28:43)

Yeah, I think it's an interesting question. Because I think it happens a little bit naturally based on the types of releases Dan had mentioned. Maybe you're just in a regular churn cycle of delivering normal updates to the market. While when communication around those goes well and everybody kind of gets in that groove, then it needs less turn management attention, if you will.

Then, for example, if you're trying to get something brand new to the market for the first time and it needs a lot of changes within the business, then you probably would need to ramp up those activities, meet more frequently, meet a little bit longer, have folks with more clear delineations of what they need to be doing within the organization to be able to meet those needs.

Michael Cinquino (29:37)

So having laid out what and why for the product ops, the last question would be when. When is the right time?

Dan O'Keefe (29:48)

Yeah, so it's quite interesting because without product ops, what you'll start to see is timelines will elongate. Going back to when is "it" done, it goes in the wrong direction if you don't have product ops. Because what will start to happen is the development team won't give a date until they're almost done, which means that the marketing can't start to work on a marketing campaign, which means sales can't be selling three months ahead of when the product's released to market, which means your services and support won't touch it until the software is now in a user acceptance test format.

And so what could have been delivered in a three to six month window is now taking nine to 12 months because of the lack of coherence and trust across the organization. So when that starts to happen, when you start to see that trust breakdown, people not willing



to do their part until there's a direct handoff from the prior team, that's when you need product ops. And a good product ops organization will act as an accelerant on time to market and then act as an accelerant therefore on the value of the organization, right? Because if I can bring product to market more quickly and get more customers on it, I get paid more, and we increase the overall throughput of the organization. So it's not just that product ops is necessary to help. It's actually a key business function when introduced at the right time.

Michael Cinquino (31:00)

When it sounds like them by its very nature, while it is an accelerant, it sounds like quality doesn't take a hit.

Dan O'Keefe (31:10)

No, quality doesn't take a hit here because what you're really doing is bringing all those functions together and forcing them to learn to trust each other, right? Which takes a little bit of time, but it can happen. Nothing's sacrificed. We're not saying development should do things more quickly or that marketing shouldn't prepare the campaign. We're just saying now we can talk together and we can govern the outcome together. We can all do these, some of these things in parallel versus waiting to be very, very sequential. And so the whole thing starts to shorten. So no, there's no impact to quality at all. It really is a timeline accelerant more than anything else.

Michael Cinquino (31:40)

Got it. Susannah, is there anything that we haven't covered that you feel like needs to find its way in and or would you like to do maybe some key takeaways?

Susannah Mitchell (31:52)

Sure, I think the key takeaways here when you're thinking about this concept in general about how to navigate timelines is that you first really well define what it is and what done is across the whole organization, across everybody that's going to be committing to it. So first and foremost, you have a shared definition of what you're trying to achieve and how you're going to achieve it.

And then it comes down to trust, creating the space and the team for on cadence, regular communication that brings everybody to the table is a key part of this. And last, having timelines that harden over time as the correct engagement and input can be made. So starting with that product ask, but then evolving it to be more committed to over time as folks have time to dig in, articulate what they need to do, and can feel confident that they can hit that date.

Michael Cinquino (33:01)

Sounds like that will lend itself to some predictability, Susannah.



Susannah Mitchell (33:06)

Absolutely. What it lends itself to is predictability, more trust, and shortened time to market because you can start bringing all the work together. And as Dan said, having this done in parallel, so you reduce those handoff timeframes and reduce the overall wait periods of getting something to market.

Michael Cinquino (33:28) Dan, would you like to share some of your key takeaways or thoughts?

Dan O'Keefe (33:33)

Yeah. So first of all, I just like to say thank you to the Asendle team and to you, Michael, for having me on this. It's a very interesting conversation. I think I'll just leave a few thoughts behind. Building product is really hard. It really is, right? And it's hard to get it into the customer's hands. It's hard to get customer adoption. It's all of those things. So product ops, putting a product ops team in place that will be successful is going to be hard. So it really has to be a commitment. You have to commit to it at the executive level.

It really should come from the CPO. And see it through. It'll take, just like any agile process, you have to go through your forming, norming, and storming phases. But it's worth it in the end. So in the short term, I would anticipate the company will complain about it, because you're asking people to do things they're not used to doing. But eventually, it will be seen as kind of the glue that keeps all the different functions together to drive product to the market and to make timelines predictable.

Michael Cinquino (34:29)

Dan, thank you so much for that. We have Dan O'Keefe, Chief Product Officer at PCMI. And Susannah Mitchell, VP of Operations at Ascendle. Thanks for joining us on this episode of Ascendle Unscripted, and we'll see you on the next episode.

Dan O'Keefe (34:43) Thank you, Michael.

Susannah Mitchell (34:44) Thank you.

Michael Cinquino (34:45) Pleasure.

