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The 2026 CPO INSIGHTS REPORT

From Builder to Investor: **The New Product Mandate**

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Foreword by Products That Count Resident CPO **Renée Niemi**

Recently, I spoke with a Chief Product Officer with a rich history of scaling at some formidable media companies. He told me, “This is the golden age of Product Leadership.”

If you want a “TL/DR” sound bite for the 2026 CPO Insights Report, it doesn’t get much more accurate than that.

Once again this year, it has been our privilege at Products That Count to interview and survey more than 1,500 Chief Product Officers (CPOs), from early-stage startups to Fortune 100 giants, such as Cisco and Walmart. Across the conversations, it’s clear that CPOs are setting the AI agenda. The challenge is no longer just adoption, but rethinking how their organizations create and deliver value at the speed of AI.

This is Products That Count’s fifth year of in-depth CPO research. Over that time, we’ve watched the role evolve from a rarity in large enterprises to one of the most influential positions in the executive suite. Today, over 70% of the CPOs we interviewed have responsibilities beyond traditional product management, including engineering, data, analytics, product marketing, pricing, go-to-market strategy, and M&A. Product leadership is now central to business leadership and increasingly being elevated to the CEO role.

Last year, CPOs told us about using AI in the product. AI has dramatically lowered the cost of building. More than 80% of CPOs told us AI has already materially accelerated their product development cycles, with many reporting productivity gains up to 10X across prototyping, engineering, research, and testing. What once required large teams, specialized functions, and months of coordination can now happen in days.

This shifts the constraint from product development to go-to-market. Speed to market is the #1 concern for CPOs in 2026.

This is the new divide among CPOs:

> **Good CPOs produce diminishing returns** by trying to move faster inside the system they already have. They are shipping more features, improving efficiency, and asking teams to do more with less. But many are beginning to feel the limits of incremental optimization.

> **Great CPOs rebuild their organizations around a new kind of operator: the Product Builder.** They recognize that speed alone is not enough. These leaders are collapsing the boundaries between product, design, engineering, and data.

They are hiring for judgment, systems thinking, and adaptability over narrowly defined functional expertise. Their organizations are becoming smaller, flatter, and dramatically more leveraged.

As for the best CPOs, they are becoming Chief Product Investors because they see something even bigger coming. They believe the next wave of disruption will not come from today's competitors, but from entirely new entrants operating at AI speed. Their challenge is no longer just deciding what to build, it is deciding where to invest. Those leaders continuously scan for emerging shifts, allocate resources intenally and externally through M&A, and use rapid experimentation to discover new markets before others see them.

AI's impact on product organizations is not just about the CPO. The product manager role is evolving as well. As traditional boundaries between product, design, and engineering begin to collapse, we are seeing the rise of a new kind of operator: the Product Builder, capable of moving from idea to execution with speed and leverage. We see this new role as capable of doing the work of many roles in one function. Where it once required a team of 12 people to develop a single product, a team of 12 Product Builders can now deliver 12 products.

This leads us to this year's bold prediction: by 2030, the role of Product Manager will cease to exist, and will be replaced by the Product Builder.

Through all of this, the fundamentals of product leadership are being tested in new ways. The product leader's ability to make decisions, allocate resources, and lead organizations through rapid change is becoming more important than ever.

It's hard to remember that we are in the early stages of the AI revolution. But wherever this (still new) technology is headed, I'm sure of one thing: the future belongs to those who move fastest. Not just in building products, but also in bringing them to market and turning them into value.

For those product leaders who are ready to go on offense, this is your playbook.

Renée Niemi

As Resident CPO at Products That Count, Renée Niemi leads executive programs including industry research, executive workshops, and the annual CPO Awards. She speaks with up to 10 CPOs a week, advising leaders through AI-driven transformation, organizational change, and accelerating go-to-market demands. Renée also serves as Partner at Mighty Capital, helping identify the next generation of category-defining enterprise tech companies. Over three decades, she has led product organizations at world-class companies, including Google and Logitech, where she served as one of five GMs and CPO before the role was widely defined.

Executive Summary

The 2026 CPO Insights Report is the fifth year in an ongoing research series by Products That Count, a global community of 600,000+ CPOs and product experts.

This year's report draws on insights from more than 1,500 Chief Product Officers across twelve industries and three continents. We also expanded the dataset to include private companies with $1B-$10B in revenue. This reflects the reality that 96% of AI companies are private and much of today's product innovation is happening outside the public markets.

The report is shaped by the following five themes:

1: Speed is the top concern of CPOs

The primary constraint on shipping products used to be the long cycle times of product development, including engineering, design, and prototyping. AI has condensed timeframes from months down to (in many cases) days.

Last year, we identified a 10X improvement in development. The velocity keeps increasing.

2: From Product Manager to Product Builder

By 2030, Products That Count predicts that the product manager will be entirely replaced with a new role: the Product Builder.

Product Builders discover, prototype, build, and deploy with AI velocity, and the goal is 2x better value delivered at 10x speed. Product Builders are increasing at a 10x pace. Traditional product managers have declined by 30%, and by as much as 70% in SaaS.

3: The bottleneck has moved downstream

Due to faster-than-ever product development, the new bottleneck in shipping products is go-to-market, adoption, and organizational alignment.

Product leaders now must ask, "How fast can we turn what we build into value?" Their task is to make the entire organization move at the speed of product development.

4: The best CPOs are going on offense

All CPOs must defend their product positions, especially given the accessibility of AI which makes moats more vulnerable than ever. But great product leaders are not content to just play defense.

The best CPOs will use an offensive mindset to cut go-to-market time by 50% because the product environment is full of opportunities for the leader who is ready to seize them.

5: The emergence of the Chief Product Investor

The best CPOs are becoming portfolio allocators, reallocating resources, and driving enterprise-level outcomes. The rise of the Chief Product Investor creates the CPO Alpha 2.0: the competitive advantage gained when a company ships and iterates faster than its industry rivals. Today 1 in 3 CPOS now own and drive the M&A agenda for their companies.

The present research shows a distinct new trajectory for the Chief Product Officer. CPOs are moving away from execution, spending less time managing stakeholders and roadmaps—and more time on strategy, innovation, and portfolio thinking.

In 2026, the CPO is going on offense. This is their playbook.

Introduction

From Sun Tzu, to George Washington, to Jack Dempsey, it has been said that the best defense is a good offense. Three years into the AI era, the time for offense has arrived for the Chief Product Officer.

The current environment of AI-powered product development has pushed the CPO role to evolve, leading to the emergence of the Chief Product Investor. With this shift, the CPO's mandate is not to maintain roadmaps but to transform organizations.

In the past, the biggest constraint on product organizations was product development speed. AI has evaporated that constraint. It has also made new products less defensible, with shallow moats and competitors able to replicate AI products on all sides.

Without the constraint of dev time, a new bottleneck has emerged: go-to-market speed. Just because orgs can develop products faster than ever, that doesn't mean they can sell them. Therefore, the new CPO must be relentlessly strategic, placing bets on new markets, investing in new products where necessary.

In this new era, it is non-negotiable that good CPOs use AI to build products faster. But simply creating products faster, without faster GTM, will not be enough. In fact it will cause problems, with an unintended consequence being that faster product development will increase future tech debt for organizations.

In contrast, the best CPOs will use an offensive mindset to cut go-to-market time by 50%. In doing so, these CPOs will transform their organizations.

Along with this transformation of the CPO role and product organizations, product teams will look radically different. Our bold prediction is as follows: by 2030, the CPO's team will not consist of product managers; Products That Count predicts the role as we now know it will disappear entirely. (Within 2 years, product managers will see 70% reduction in SaaS, 30% across the board.) It will be replaced by a new function: the Product Builder. This is a hybrid role which collapses product management and engineering skills into a single, agile, powerful role, capable of creating and shipping, with accountability for results. Product Builders will increase 10x by 2030.

With a team of Product Builders by their side, offensive-minded Chief Product Investors will put their orgs in position to control the pace of business innovation and out-maneuver the competition.

Part 1: Product Development at the Speed of AI

***Topline takeaway**: AI makes building products faster and cheaper than ever, and development is no longer the limiting factor for product orgs.*

It is no exaggeration to say that product teams have always operated under one simple constraint: building software is expensive, slow, and resource-intensive. Everything about the product organization reflected this reality, from roadmaps to the careful prioritization of small feature sets due to limited engineering capacity.

In the age of AI, that constraint has largely vanished.

Chief Product Officers say that artificial intelligence is accelerating every stage of product development. Discovery and research. Coding. Testing and iteration. A full 75% of our CPO survey respondents cited AI's role in supercharging prototyping and product exploration, making it the most commonly cited emerging category.

Time and again, CPOs told us that AI enables:

- "Shortened prototyping, design, and development processes such that the overall time-to-market is faster."
- "Faster time to market and rapid prototyping with the help of low code/no code AI tools." "Faster cross-functional prototyping."
- "Internal tooling that supports faster idea generation and application of previous learnings to current work."

What recently took months, even years to accomplish have collapsed to weeks or days. This includes not only design and development but also innovative new opportunities such as building products in collaboration with stakeholders.

> **"AI is fundamentally shifting our operational capacity by 10x and transforms how we think about resource allocation and speed-to-market."**
> **- Paramount CPO Dane Glasgow**

Speed isn't everything, of course. Some CPOs worry that the increased pace of development, combined with AI hype, may produce unintended consequences, such as massive future tech debt. More than one survey respondent cautioned against "just doing AI for AI's sake."

Part 2: From Product Manager to Product Builder

Topline takeaway: *AI collapses roles, creating opportunities for high-leverage, hybrid operators who combine product and engineering*

As AI increases the speed of product development, job functions within the product organization are being rapidly revised. No role is more impacted than the product manager.

It is already true that the product manager role has been evolving rapidly. Last year, we described the rise of the "super PM," with AI turning product managers into high-leverage generalists, highlighting the importance of adaptability, and the power of co-intelligence. For the CPOs in our survey, their reliance on generalist product managers has nearly doubled in the past year, rising from 15% to 28%, as product orgs move away from hyper-specialized roles.

This year, we are noticing a new development. We believe that the product manager role is changing so fast that it is becoming an entirely new role altogether: the Product Builder. This is the world of AI-powered product management, in which cross-functional roles are collapsing inward into a new and powerful hybrid role that disrupts the traditional linear structure of Product Management→ Design → Engineering.

Those distinct functions operated within defined boundaries. Completed work was handed off from one role to the next, a sort of assembly line approach to building software products. This structure reflected the constraints of software development: specialized skills, long timelines, and high coordination costs.

The Product Builder asks: what if those boundaries are no longer necessary?

Consider the capabilities of the product manager in 2026:

- Prototype UX directly
- Simulate product workflows and real-time idea testing
- "Vibe coding" and other means of working code generation

Add to those technical capabilities business insights and design thinking, and you see the shape of the Product Builder. These individuals are able to operate across the entire product lifecycle. They move from idea to execution with fewer handoffs.

AI enables individuals to do more—but more importantly, it changes where effort is applied. As one product leader observed: "The easiest part is writing the initial item. It's the review cycles that will kill you."

Product Builders reduce the friction associated with review cycles, coordination, validation, and iteration. They shorten feedback loops, collapse workflows, and move faster from idea to production, evolving the role of product manager from coordination to execution.

Product Builders are the execution layer of the product portfolio: high-leverage operators capable of rapidly testing bets, iterating on signals, and scaling what works. Together with the CPO, they enable the organization to operate at the speed of the AI era.

Emerging product management and product development capabilities have revealed a new product delivery bottleneck, as we will see next.

Part 3: GTM Velocity Is the New Bottleneck

Topline takeaway: *The main constraint is not the speed of product development but getting new products to market and adopted at scale.*

Despite the obvious advancements in AI-assisted product development, the most significant insight from our 2026 CPO survey data is this: The real impact of AI is not faster product development but rather organizational transformation.

Good CPOs are using AI to ship features faster. The best CPOs are using it to do something more groundbreaking: rethinking the very operating model of the company itself. Product leaders now must ask, “How fast can we turn what we build into value?”

According to Vasion CPO Scott Lee,

> **“Engineering speed means historical PM/Eng ratios don't apply. Product management is becoming a bottleneck.”**

Comparing survey data between 2025 and 2026 reveals a sea change in internal constraints over the past year. What was once the dominant friction point—engineering capacity—is now taking a back seat to more complex organizational hurdles.

One product leader described the shift as moving from “optimizing the node” to “optimizing the system,” reflecting the need to rethink how the entire organization delivers value.

Top Internal Challenge	2025	2026
Speed to Market	14%	**22%**
Product-First Culture	11%	**16%**
Legacy Systems	20%	18%

Survey question: “What is the number 1 INTERNAL challenge facing you over the next year?”

Investment on refactoring legacy systems is no longer considered the main drag on forward progress, as seen in a 2-point decrease. Now, the main challenge of the Chief Product Officer is rapidly delivering company-wide value. With an 8-point increase in importance, “Speed to Market” reveals the perceived importance of velocity: quickly turning insights into shipped product and customer value is a competitive advantage.

Closely related is the 5-point jump in the importance of a “Product-First Culture.” This reflects the realization that the entire organization must understand and prioritize the product as the core driver of growth in order to avoid delays and friction.

Until recently, Engineering was the primary bottleneck. The pace of innovation was limited by the time, cost, and complexity of building and deploying software. In a word, for many product roadmaps, Engineering had become a chokepoint.

AI has improved and even turbocharged the speed and overall capabilities of Engineering and Productization teams. But the chokepoints haven’t been eliminated: they’ve been pushed downstream, to Go-to-market, Adoption, and Organizational Alignment.

> **"While internal product development has achieved record speed, we are increasingly encountering friction at the point of delivery. The new bottleneck is go-to-market execution, user adoption, and effective monetization."**
> **- Products That Count Resident CPO Jay Patel**

Engineering → Productization → Go-to-Market → Customer Adoption → Organizational Alignment

The surveyed CPOs pointed out these downstream chokepoints again and again, as in the following responses:

- “Customer adoption cycles are slow.”
- “Scaling to non-proactive and disinterested users.”
- “Lack of change in underlying core business processes.”

The CPOs who emerge as the “best” in the coming years will be those who can loosen these constraints, by making the entire organization move at the speed of product development.

Part 4: The CPO on Offense

***Topline takeaway:** The bottleneck has shifted, and CPOs must move beyond defending roadmaps to strategic bets on new market opportunities.*

It will always be important for product leaders to defend their strongest positions and assets. This is possibly more true now that AI makes moats increasingly vulnerable. But it is also true that CPOs in 2026 are undertaking a distinct mindset shift: they're going on offense.

Traditionally, the CPO was a high-level operations executor. Think roadmap management, sprint execution, and the day-to-day mechanics of product delivery. The acceleration of product development has abruptly shifted their mandate, away from execution and toward strategy.

When we asked CPOs on which areas they spend most of their time, the differences between 2026 and 2025 were stark. Greatly reduced are time spent on managing stakeholders and roadmaps. Instead, CPOs are working on strategy, innovation, and portfolio thinking. The role is clearly moving up the stack.

Activity	2025	2026
Product Strategy	69%	**74%**
Innovation & Ideation	21%	**31%**
Portfolio Management	13%	**24%**
Stakeholder Management	28%	10%
Roadmap Development	18%	10%

Survey question: "On which of the following areas do you spend the most time? Choose 3."

The most ambitious CPOs are expanding their scope across three dimensions:

- Geographic expansion: AI-driven localization enables faster entry into global markets.
- New market segments: Products are being rapidly adapted for new audiences. Increasing levels of personalization are made possible by AI.
- New routes to market: New distribution models are also enabled by AI, such as self-serve platforms, new partner ecosystems (e.g. two-sided marketplaces), and embedded distribution.

Product leaders are now focused squarely on go-to-market, as they are increasingly responsible for not just what gets built, but how, where—and how quickly—it reaches the customer. Along with that, the line between Product and Marketing has blurred. Product executives often have direct influence over positioning, adoption, and monetization.

The offensive CPO is an organizational leader on a mission of value creation. They define strategy, expand opportunity, and work to align the organization behind their goals.

To be sure, in many organizations there is tension regarding where to innovate versus defend. One CPO described this challenge as the “innovator’s dilemma: the difficulty of capital allocation to new innovations in a business with a strong existing product.”

Defending those key positions remains paramount. But the best CPOs understand the new product environment is full of opportunities for the leader who is ready to seize them.

Part 5: The Emergence of the Chief Product Investor

***Topline takeaway:** The best CPOs are becoming portfolio allocators, placing bets, reallocating resources, and driving enterprise-level outcomes.*

In 2025, we introduced the concept of the CPO Alpha Effect: companies with award-winning CPOs were more likely to generate positive annualized returns than those without. In 2026, we have found a factor that is related but specifically about speed. We're calling it CPO Alpha 2.0: the measurable competitive advantage gained when a company ships and iterates faster than its industry rivals.

The insights from the 2026 CPO Insights Report have made this point over and over again: speed is now a lever for capital allocation.

AI diffuses the cost of failure. If it once cost $1M to test a new market entry and now costs $50K through AI-assisted prototyping and simulated discovery, the CPO can place significantly more bets. The question is no longer what to build, but where to invest.

That shift encapsulates the emergence of the Chief Product Investor.

For a traditional CPO, the question is, "What features can we fit into this quarter?" But a Chief Product Investor thinks much more strategically, asking, "Where should we deploy our next $10M of R&D to create the most enterprise value?"

> **"CPOs are thinking broadly about how we are deploying capital. Should we double down or divest?" - Revelear CPO Paul Burke**

Our survey shows that over half of all CPOs now have P&L responsibility. Two years ago, Products That Count predicted that product leaders would take on increasing ownership of the bottom line; that prediction is coming to fruition. Based on that development, thinking like an investor is, in fact, essential to the CPO's job description.

Thinking like a Chief Product Investor requires a portfolio mindset:

- Properly sized bets: The Chief Product Investor treats product lines like asset classes, both core (steady returns) and exploratory (high risk/high reward).
- Killswitch, engage: Underperforming bets are cut ruthlessly based on up-to-date signals.
- Market capture: Success is measured by appropriate KPIs, e.g. user satisfaction and market share gained through speed and execution.
- Pricing and monetization: 31% of CPOs report direct pricing oversight, treating it as a product feature that can be iterated to maximize revenue.
- Build vs. buy: CPOs often act as internal corporate development leaders, being asked whether to acquire capabilities or build them with AI-native teams.

Lastly, a word on the Chief Product Investor and metrics.

The Chief Product Investor is in a fundamentally different position than the Chief Financial Officer. Where CFOs may be necessarily more reactive, Chief Product Investors can—and must—be proactive, catching disruption to the business (competitive entrants, new technology, etc) before the financial metrics are reflective.

"Finance looks at lagging indicators like revenue, margin, and quarterly performance. Product leaders focus on leading indicators: where value is emerging, where disruption is happening, and where to place the next bets."
– **Products That Count Founder and Board Chair SC Moatti**

In the end, the Chief Product Investor-led product organization has a profile that operates as a portfolio of bets, driven by speed, guided by data, and optimized for continuous reinvention. It is optimized for the era of AI-enabled product development.

Part 6: The 2030 Forecast for Product Leadership

Topline takeaway: *The product manager will be replaced by 2030, as the Product Builder becomes the CPO's trusted partner.*

The Chief Product Officer has reshaped product businesses profoundly in the past 6 years. And Products That Count has been tracking this reshaping all along. We first predicted the rise of the CPO, which grew from just 3–4% of Fortune 1000 companies having a CPO in 2020, to over 30% just 2 years later.

We predicted product leaders would move beyond siloed influence to own P&Ls, which has happened. We predicted they would step into CEO roles, only to watch 20% of our award winners promoted to CEO or President within 12 months.

Now, we have a new prediction, not specifically about the CPO but rather about the engine of the product management function: the product manager.

Our prediction is a bold one: by 2030, the pure product manager role will no longer exist.

In the next 2 years, 70% of SaaS product managers will no longer exist; that number will be 30% across all sectors. These product managers will be replaced by a new role, the Product Builder, a hybrid PM/engineering role.

The hybrid Product Builder will work alongside the offense-minded CPO. Together, they will build, ship, and scale at the speed of AI.

The transformational leaders in this next stage of AI will be those willing to redesign how products are built and how organizations operate. Good product leaders will move features faster. Great ones will rethink the system. The best will operate as portfolio-driven engines of innovation, placing bets and scaling what works as Chief Product Investors.

The future belongs to those who push forward. The future belongs to the builders of products that count.

About Mighty Capital

Mighty Capital is the VC firm that leverages the Product Alpha Effect, a data-backed way to produce outliers by reading product signals from a 600,000-product-leader network.

Founded in 2018 by SC Moatti, a product visionary and former Meta product leader, and Jennifer Vancini, an idea-to-IPO veteran of tech investing, we bring a differentiated edge to venture. Through Moatti's 600,000-strong Products That Count network of product leaders, we see trends before others do, giving us a proprietary advantage in sourcing, diligence, and post-investment value creation.

Our early-stage B2B tech portfolio speaks for itself: 1 in 5 companies is a category leader like Amplitude (NASDAQ:AMPL), Netskope (NASDAQ:NTSK) and Groq.

Founders consistently call us the most value-add investor on their cap table, and use our global product ecosystem as a marketplace to accelerate time to revenue, scale, and exit.

Anchored by GCM Grosvenor, we're deploying Fund III with both prior funds in top decile DPI and TVPI, $2B+ in value created for the portfolio, and 6 IPOs to date. Learn more at Mighty.Capital.

PRODUCTS THAT COUNT

About Products That Count

Products That Count is the world's largest nonprofit community engaging 500,000+ Chief Product Officers and product leaders united by a mission: to empower everyone to build products that truly count.

In a world flooded with products, only a few ignite passion, deliver value at scale, and transform lives. Behind those exceptional products are visionary Chief Product Officers (CPOs) and highperforming product teams driving innovation at the most bleeding-edge companies.

We recognize these trailblazers through our coveted Awards, accelerate careers from PM to the C-suite and beyond through daily best practices, and serve as the trusted advisor to nearly all Fortune 1000 CPOs.

Our Corporate Alliance includes Walmart, Ford, Cisco, Johnson & Johnson, Amplitude, and more. The most admired product leaders across industries serve on our Advisory Council, guiding the future of product leadership.

Together, we're shaping a future where every product counts.
Learn more at **productsthatcount.org**