



Actuation Consulting®  
Propel forward.

**The Study Of Product  
Team Performance™**

**A Post-Pandemic  
Look At How  
Covid-19 Impacted  
Product Teams**

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**“Crisis is the great  
revealer.”**

**Simon Sinek**  
*Author of The Infinite Game*

## Foreword

In this edition we take a look back, post-pandemic, at the product team research we conducted during the heart of the COVID-19 crisis. Thankfully, the pandemic has waned, but we can still see its lingering effects in the workplace.

One emerging issue is the current cultural tug of war between senior executives and employees over remote work. While employees have come to highly value the flexibility of working at home, many organizations are trying to bring them back to physical offices, leading to friction between both parties. It is uncertain if there will be a widespread return to the office, or if this shift to remote work will continue. The dynamics are still evolving.

In addition to the remote work debate, the pandemic drove home the importance of having a well-defined product strategy. Organizations with a clear plan in place were better able to flex and capitalize on rapidly changing market conditions. Those that did not were forced to scramble to adjust their strategies, which often led to delays and setbacks.

This is also true for organizations that had mapped out disaster plans prior to the pandemic. Companies with such plans were able to efficiently implement existing or modified strategies in response to the pandemic, while those without were forced to create plans under pressure or merely react to the virus-induced changes. COVID-19 proved that preparedness and planning matter.

***As the survey results showed, the flexibility of an organization and its ability to pivot were key to its survival.***

The importance of clear strategies was vital. But these learnings aren't just essential for navigating challenging times, they are also good business practices overall.

# The Survey

All Actuation Consulting's subscribers, co-authors', sponsors', and promotional partners' stakeholders were invited to complete the survey in the last quarter of 2020.

As we drilled into the responses from participants detailing how they, and their organizations, are dealing with the impact of COVID-19, several themes rose to the surface.

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## Remote First Mindset

Most respondents perceive the shift to a remote environment as a trend beginning before the pandemic. However, the virus's global spread triggered a massive acceleration to stay-at-home work models as organizations had to pivot to address COVID-19 and its implications quickly.

*Survey respondents are not only embracing working from home, but they believe that their organizations should be designed with a "remote first" operating structure.*

While it is likely that hybrid work models, mixing both off- and on-site work, will become the post-pandemic norm, employees realize that continued investments in the remote working model and increased digitalization are necessary and desirable.

As one respondent put it, "We were rigidly against remote work before the pandemic but have seen that remote work can work well. The lesson here is to try things (such as remote, technology, and collaboration trends) in small doses perpetually to see what changes might work for the business before a pandemic forces change to happen under duress."

It is also important to point out that workplace migration to remote work has not been spread equally throughout the economy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while all businesses have been impacted, remote work gains have been primarily concentrated in educational services and finance. Approximately 60% of academic service providers and 58% of financial companies had at least some employees working from home during the pandemic. Service companies in the food, retail, and construction industries were among the lowest adopters, as this work is difficult to perform remotely.<sup>1</sup>

The shift to a remote-first mindset comes with challenges. Employees cite issues with internet connectivity, process documentation, employee onboarding, feelings of alienation, and a lack of empathy from executives and managers as considerable challenges needing to be addressed.

Many respondents faced personal loss during the pandemic. One survey respondent writes, "I lost my mother during the pandemic, and neither myself nor my organization was prepared to pivot when I needed to take significant time off. It has taken me a full six months to get close to my pre-grief performance. As the pandemic drags on and we lose more loved ones, this has the potential to be a big problem."

As organizations manage through the pandemic and transition to a hybrid work model, they need to keep the personal toll the pandemic is taking on employees' health and well-being in mind.

## The Impact on Strategy

Respondent organizations with a clear view of their strategy found it easier to pivot and make necessary changes to their business model and operating practices.

*Overall, survey respondents were surprisingly upbeat, and many viewed the changes taking place as opportunities on which they could capitalize.*

As one person put it, "Extraordinary situations are extraordinary opportunities!"

Many respondents indicated that their organizations have had to reprioritize their investments, true up their strategy and emphasize virtual products and passive income streams (e.g., subscription services) that do not require human sales to deliver revenue. Employees are also warier of what may be coming down the road as many believe that COVID-19 will not be the only pandemic they encounter during their careers – this leads to the next topic, planning.

## Increased Desire for Effective Planning

As one individual phrased it, "Disaster recovery planning is not just for IT systems!" It is virtually impossible to plan for black swan events, but many health experts and even Bill Gates have been warning for years about a global pandemic threat. Many respondents believe their organizations failed to plan for disaster sufficiently before the pandemic and would welcome more planning (e.g., business continuity plans, increased contingency and scenario planning, special teams development) in advance of the next crisis.

## Finally, Flexibility

Respondents cite a flexible culture as key to weathering this pandemic. "What was not possible before the pandemic is now possible; what was easy is now difficult." The pandemic's impact is undeniable, and this respondent's quote describes how the pandemic scrambled the status quo. Employees migrated en masse to working at home. Customer meetings, presentations, and trade shows all went virtual. Supply chains lost their links.

To survive in this challenging environment, survey respondents cite the need for a "flexible, agile and entrepreneurial mindset." They also indicate that their organizations needed to take a closer look at what activities should cease.

*As one employee said, "Everything plus more is not a strategy, nor is it sustainable.*

## Conclusion

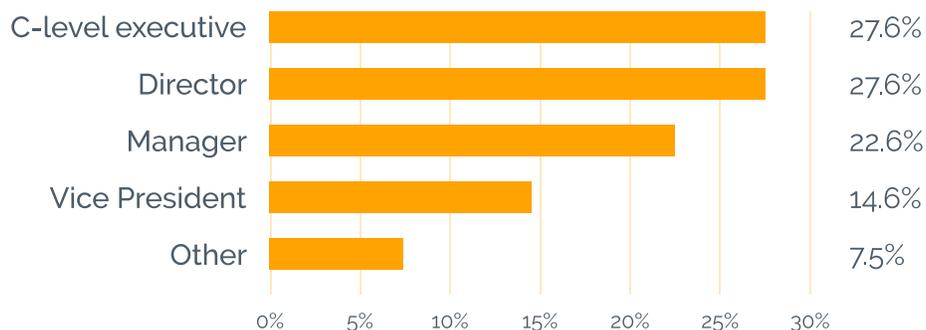
COVID-19 has resulted in unimaginable harm to individuals and businesses. It is difficult to fathom the loss of life and livelihood caused by this deadly virus. But despite the pandemic, survey respondents remain surprisingly upbeat about the opportunities that might be down the road. New markets, remote working models, and additional products and services are all possibilities.

From our vantage point as industry consultants, we hope that this research helped capture any lessons learned from this pandemic so employees and organizations can better prepare and adapt to challenges that lie ahead.

# Survey Respondent Profile

*The majority of survey respondents (96.5%) indicated they play an active role in product/service creation or enhancement within their organization.*

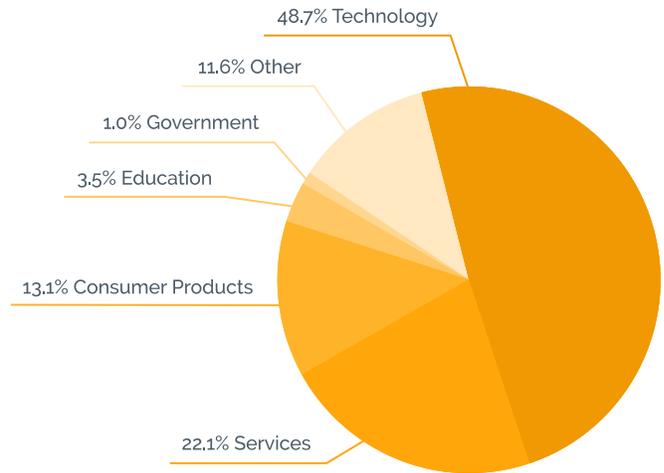
**The same percentage of respondents (27.6%) said they reported to a C-level executive as said they reported to a director.**



Another 22.6% answered that they reported to a manager, and 14.6% said they reported to a vice president. The remaining respondents (7.5%) wrote in alternative answers, stating they reported to engineers, product managers, or solution architects. A few indicated they were self-employed and didn't "report" to anyone.

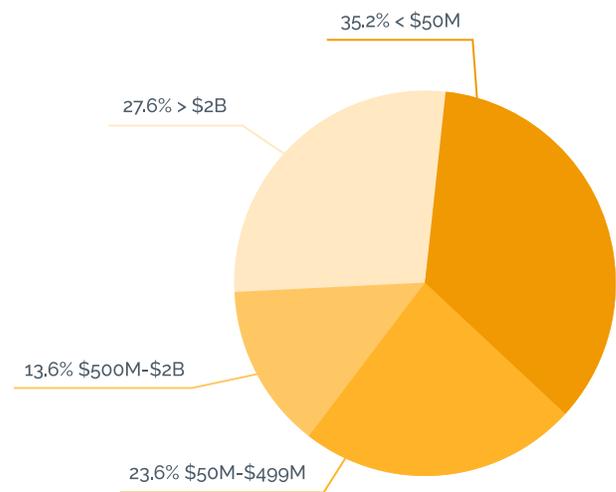
**Nearly half of survey respondents (48.7%) worked in technology (comprised of hardware and software), and 22.1% said the primary focus of their business was services.**

Consumer products (13.1%), education (3.5%), and government (1%) made up 17.6% of responses. 11.6% indicated their organization's focus was not listed.



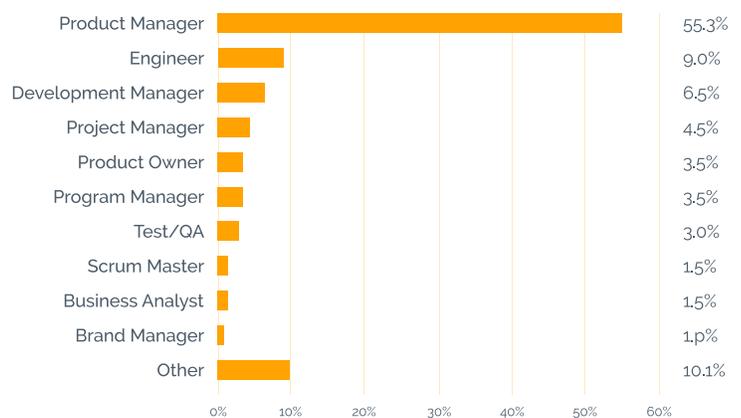
**The annual company revenue of survey respondents' organizations is split relatively evenly among three segments: 27.6% report their organizations have annual revenues exceeding \$2B, 23.6% report revenues between \$50M and \$499M, and 35.2% said their yearly revenue is less than \$50M.**

A fourth segment representing 13.6% percent of respondents indicate company revenues of \$500M to \$2B.



**Product managers comprised more than half of survey respondents (55.3%), followed by engineers (9.0%), and development managers (6.5%).**

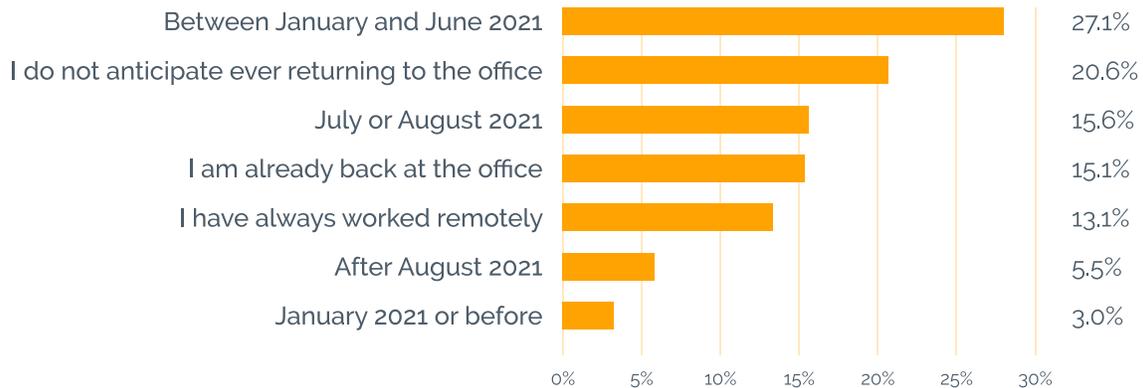
Program managers, project managers, product owners, and quality assurance professionals made up anywhere from 3 to 5% of respondents, with percentages of 4.5, 3.5, 3.5, and 3.0, respectively.



## Survey Results

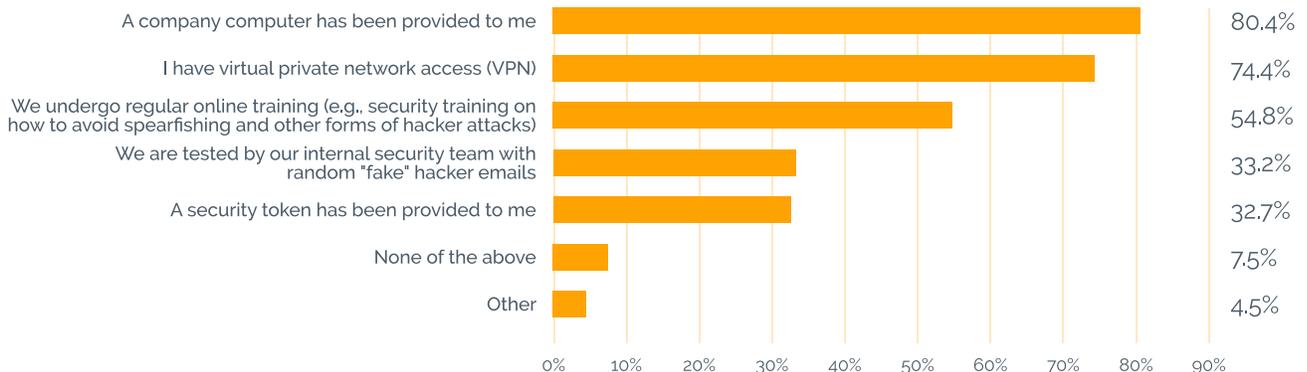
# The Pandemic Effect

### 1. When have you been told to return to the office?



The shift to working remotely had already begun before the pandemic; 13% of respondents said they had always worked from home. A surprising number of respondents reported that they did not anticipate ever returning to the office (21%). When this survey was taken during the last quarter of 2020, 30% of respondents thought they would be back in the office before June 2021, another 16% thought they would be commuting by August 2021, and 6% thought it would be Fall (after August 2021) before they made the transition back. Fifteen percent of respondents reported they had already returned to the office.

### 2. What steps has your organization taken to ensure/enhance data security while you work from home?

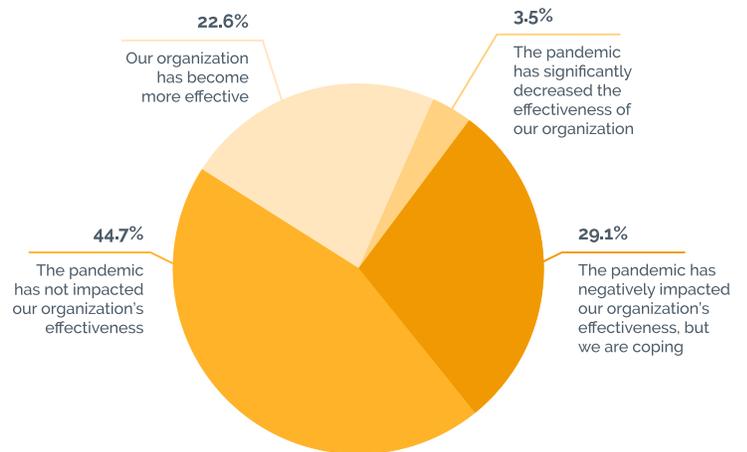


### (Check all that apply.)

Not unexpected, the top three responses to this question included the provision of a customer computer (80.4%), virtual private network access (74.4%), and regular online training with an emphasis on security (54.8%). Two-thirds of respondents indicated their companies took additional steps, supplying security tokens (32.7%), and performing periodic testing using fake hacker and phishing emails (33.2%).

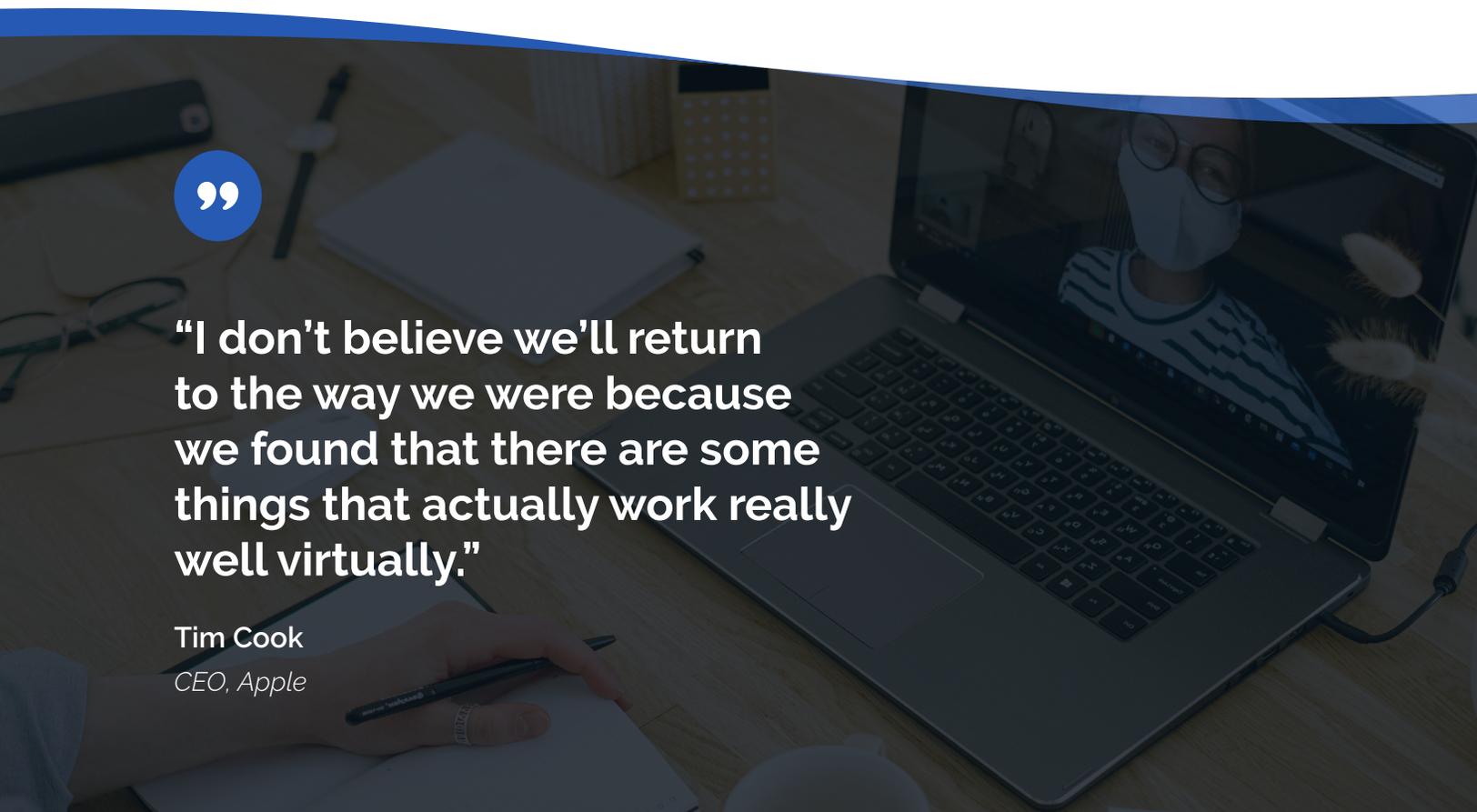
### 3. How has the pandemic impacted your organization's effectiveness?

It was encouraging to see that nearly two-thirds of respondents reported that their organization's effectiveness was not affected at all (45%), or despite being negatively affected, was coping successfully with the challenges (29%). Surprisingly, 23% indicated that their organizations had become more effective, and only 4% believed that the pandemic had significantly decreased their organizations' effectiveness.



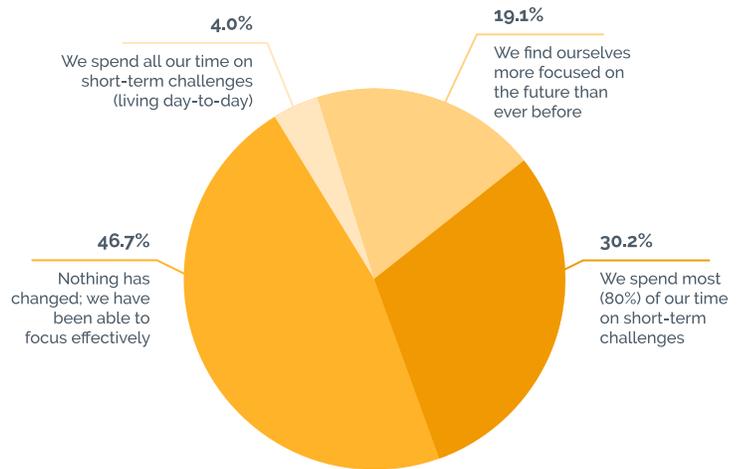
**“I don't believe we'll return to the way we were because we found that there are some things that actually work really well virtually.”**

**Tim Cook**  
*CEO, Apple*



#### 4. Is your organization having difficulty getting stakeholders to focus on the future during the pandemic?

The large number of respondents who indicated that their ability to focus on the future was unchanged (46.7%), or who could think even more long-term (19.1%), supports the positivity shown in the previous answer. But 34% of respondents did admit that their focus had become more short-term.



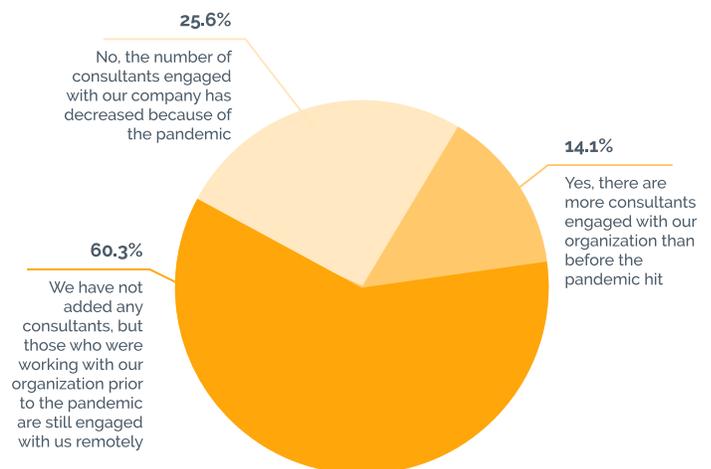
#### 5. Has your organization cut back or expanded virtual training during the pandemic?



According to respondents, "going virtual" – addressed most training needs. Nearly half said that their training level did not change; training was just delivered online (49.2%), while others indicated that though live training had ended, virtual training had picked up some of the slack (23.1%). Just over 16% of respondents saw an increase in training. Another 11.5% said their organization had drastically cut back all training (5.5%) or had never invested in training in the first place (6.0%).

#### 6. Does your organization continue to rely upon outside consultants during the pandemic?

A large percentage of respondents indicated that their organizations were still employing consultants at the same level as before the pandemic, albeit remotely (60.3%), and 14.1% reported they were utilizing consultants even more than before. Just over a quarter of respondents reported a reduction in the number of consultants engaged with their company (25.6%).



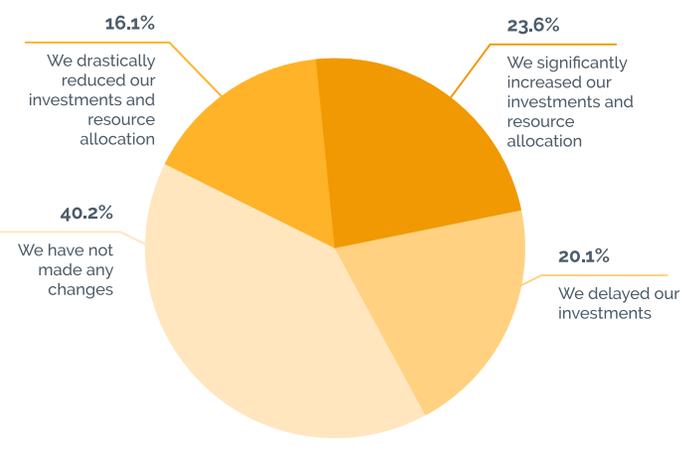


**“I think there are negatives to working from home ... We’ve seen productivity drop in certain jobs and alienation going up in certain things. So we want to get back to work in a safe way.”**

**James Dimon,**  
*CEO, JP Morgan Chase & Co.*

### **7. How has COVID-19 impacted your organization's innovation investments?**

The pandemic's influence on innovation was felt by 36.2% of respondents who reported delayed or reduced investments in innovation efforts. But according to 40.2% of respondents, their companies continued to innovate during the pandemic, and nearly a quarter report an increase in innovation investment and resource allocation (23.6%).



**8. How have innovation program outcomes, and the mandate to achieve them, changed since the global pandemic began? (Score each option from 1 through 5, where 1 = has been dramatically deemphasized and 5 = has been dramatically emphasized)**

	1	2	3	4	5
Gain/maintain competitive advantage	2.5%	3.5%	33.2%	42.2%	18.6%
Continuous improvement	2.5%	5.0%	35.7%	43.2%	13.6%
Identify new market trends and technologies	3.5%	9.0%	31.7%	36.7%	19.1%
Identify risks and devise a mitigation strategy	3.0%	8.0%	34.7%	33.2%	21.1%
Better monetize existing products and services	2.0%	5.5%	36.2%	29.1%	27.1%
Business model transformation/new product or service development	4.5%	7.5%	26.6%	37.7%	23.6%
Improve employee engagement	6.0%	9.0%	32.2%	36.7%	16.1%
Improve health, safety, and compliance	5.6%	4.0%	31.8%	32.3%	26.3%

Scored the lowest – as 1 or 2 – by the highest number of respondents were improving employee engagement (15.0%) and identifying new market trends and technologies (12.5%). The outcomes that received the highest percentage of either 4 or 5 ratings were gaining/maintaining a competitive advantage (60.8%) and business model transformation/new product or service development (61.3%). Better monetizing existing products and services received the most 3 scores (36.2%). The remaining three innovation program outcomes – continuous improvement, risk identification/mitigation strategy development, and improving health, safety, and compliance ranked somewhat in the middle, with a moderate amount of respondents rating them all across the board.

*Overall, the results seem to indicate that most organizations were operating in survival mode.*

They focused their innovation efforts on transforming their existing business models and product service lines to be more profitable or developing new product and service offerings to meet emerging demands. The end goal of both was the same, to remain competitive in a profoundly challenging marketplace.

**9. How do you intend to future proof your organization against future pandemics or other black swan events?**

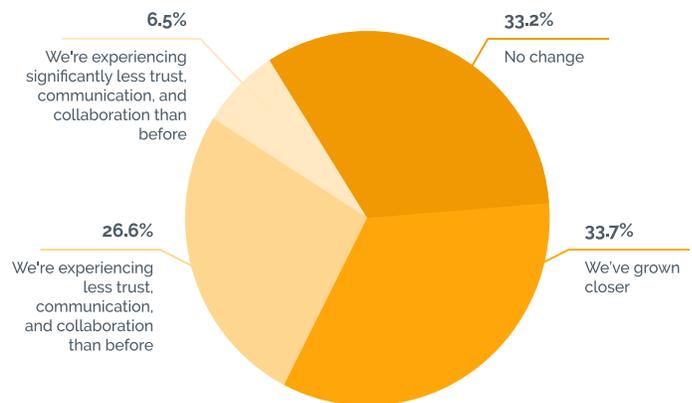
Respondents were instructed to write their responses to this survey question. Below is a summary of the main takeaways from all comments.

- Develop more alternative workspaces, including multiple distributed office hubs and work-from-home options
- Continue/increase investment in work processes, technology, employee training, and tools that promote improved remote collaboration across the company
- Diversify the company product and service portfolio to increase digital/online options for product/solution delivery, operation, and support

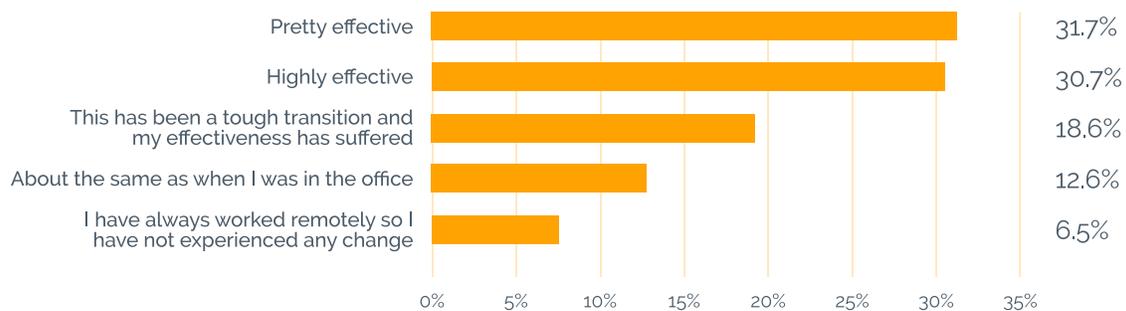
- Transition to more online training and events for customers and employees
- Do more contingency planning and refine operating models to mitigate risk, support continued revenue, and sustain long-term growth during black swan events
- Increase redundancy of supply lines and optimize resource allocation
- Improve communication to employees and suppliers
- Ensure efficient coverage of any service or personnel gaps through increased cross-training and a focus on more skill-diverse hires
- Exhibit more empathy for employees, encouraging work/family balance, and promoting mental health

## 10. How has the pandemic impacted your product team's trust, communication, and collaboration?

According to two-thirds of survey respondents, their product team's trust, communication, and collaboration have not suffered due to the pandemic, with 33.2% reporting no change and another 33.7% asserting they have grown closer. The remaining third of respondents reports experiencing a decline (33.1%).

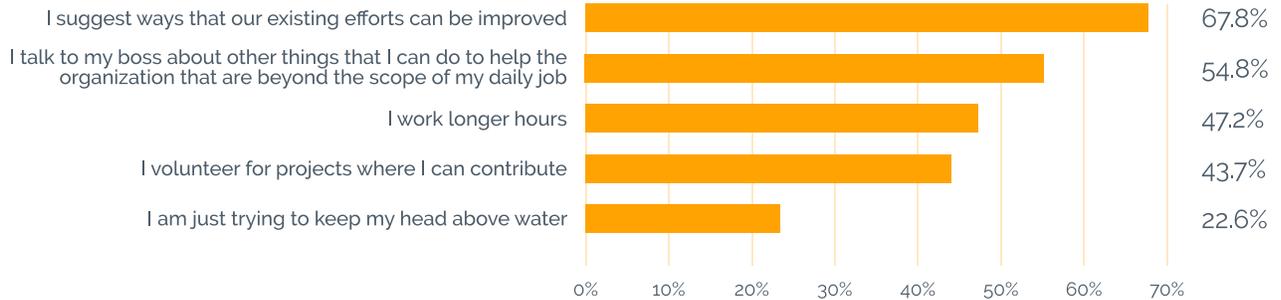


## 11. How effective are you at managing your time while working remotely?



The majority of respondents describe themselves as being pretty effective to highly effective working remotely during the pandemic (62.4%). An additional 12.6% state their effectiveness has not changed from when they worked in the office. Since 6.5% of respondents already worked remotely, they report experiencing no change in their time management skills. Only 18.6% think that their effectiveness has suffered.

## 12. While working remotely, how do you demonstrate your value and keep in the flow? (Check all that apply.)

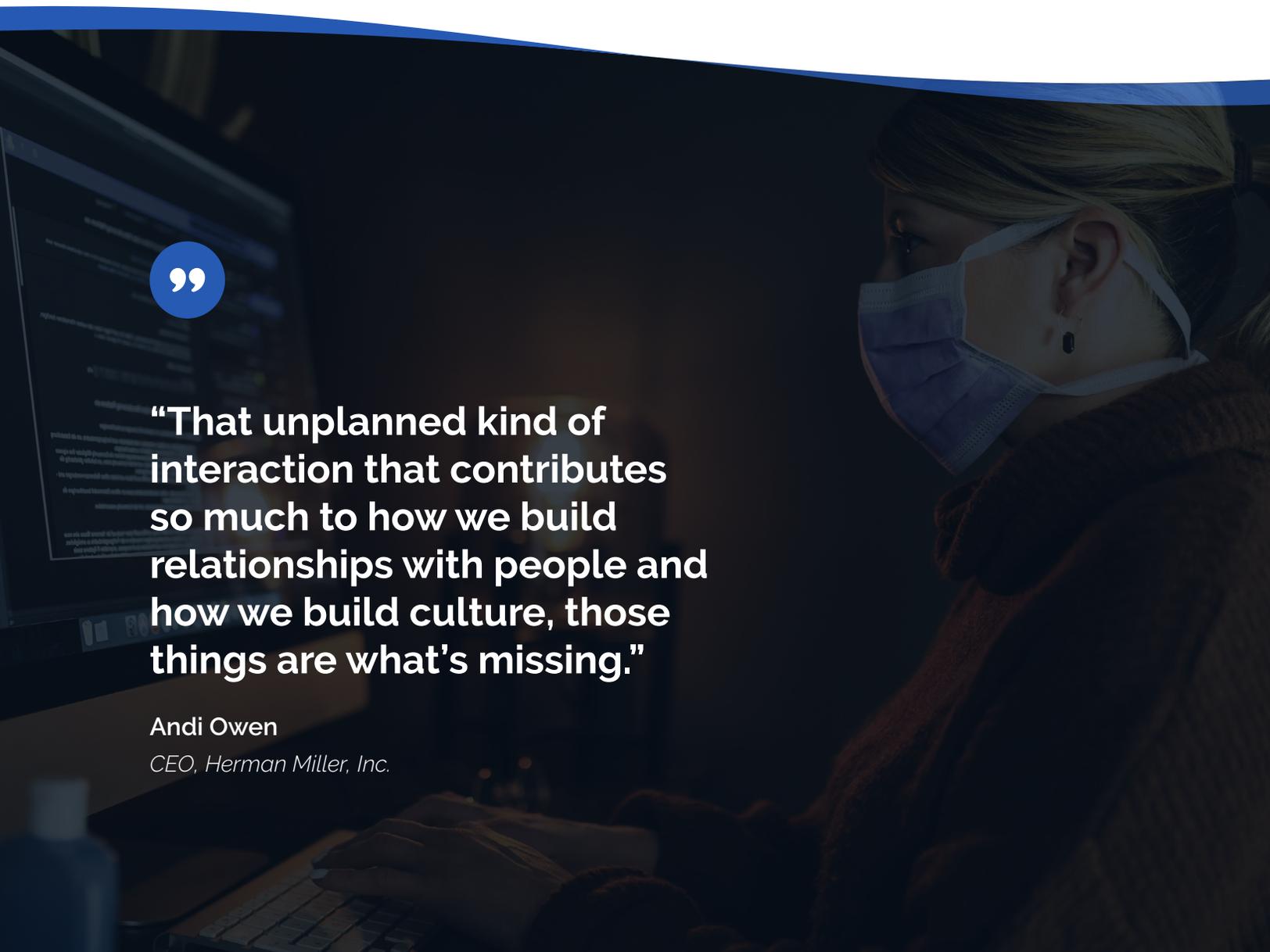


Over 75% of respondents reported heightened commitment to their jobs, either working longer hours (47.2%), volunteering for different projects (43.7%), suggesting needed improvements (67.8%), or initiating conversations with their superiors about how they can help (54.8%). Just 22.6% said they were struggling with adapting to the challenges posed by the pandemic.



**“That unplanned kind of interaction that contributes so much to how we build relationships with people and how we build culture, those things are what’s missing.”**

Andi Owen  
CEO, Herman Miller, Inc.

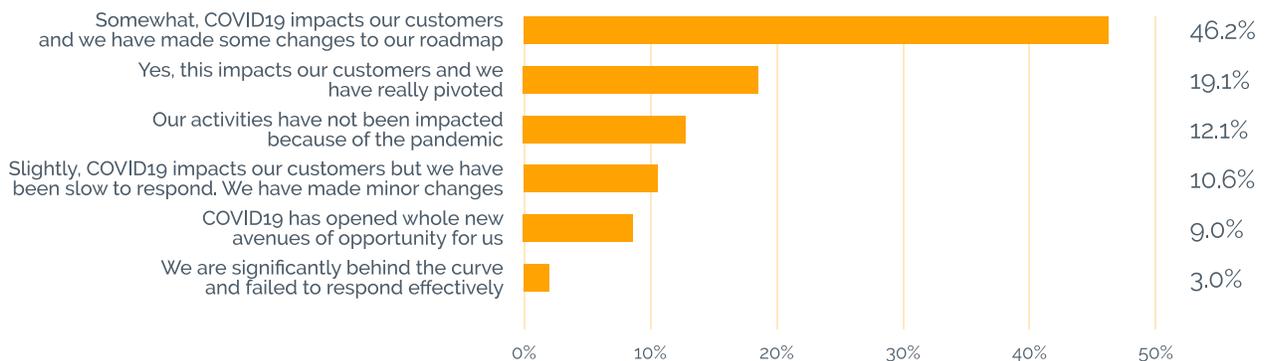


### 13. What part of the overall product development process has suffered the most during the pandemic?



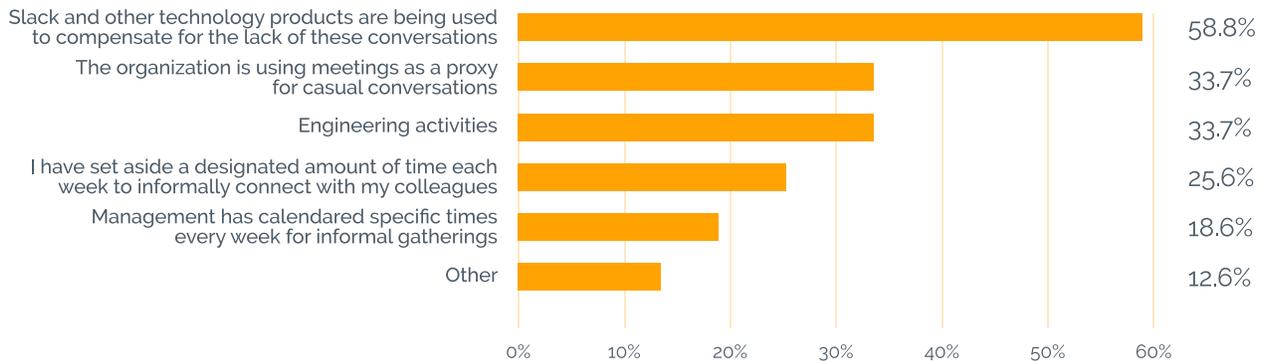
Hands down, respondents agree that upfront customer engagement has suffered the most during the pandemic (40.2%). Product roadmap development is next on the list, according to 11.1% of respondents, followed by engineering activities (10.6%), requirements prioritization (8.5%), product strategy development (7.5%), and product launch activities (7.5%). Product portfolio management and quality assurance suffered the least. This ranking would make sense as the first activity, customer engagement, would have been severely impacted by work and travel restrictions that prevented face-to-face communication, onsite support, and outside sales. These restrictions would have also affected the other product development activities, though they also most likely suffered from the volatility and uncertainty in the marketplace.

### 14. Has your product team or organization's product roadmap been revised because of the pandemic?



Only 12.1% of respondents assert that the pandemic has not impacted their organization's product roadmap. An additional 9% report that the pandemic has actually resulted in new opportunities. Three-quarters of respondents acknowledge that the pandemic has at least somewhat altered their roadmaps (75.9%), with an additional 3% lamenting that they failed to pivot effectively.

## 15. Informal conversations at the office have dried up. How have you overcome the lack of access to casual conversations?



Thanks to technology, more than half of respondents (58.8%) say they have maintained their connections with colleagues, despite working remotely. Approximately a third of respondents (33.7%) designate a specific amount of time each week to catch up with their co-workers and use meetings as a proxy for casual conversations. A little more than a quarter of respondents work for organizations that have informal gatherings of employees on the weekly calendar (25.6%).



## The Study Of Product Team Performance

# THE PANDEMIC EDITION: APPENDIX

## Meet the Authors



### Lead Author:

**Greg Geracie**

*CEO, Actuation Consulting*

Greg Geracie is a globally recognized thought leader in the field of product management and the president of Actuation Consulting, the leading global provider of product management consulting, training, and advisory services. Greg is the author of the global bestseller *Take Charge Product Management* and led the development of *The Guide to the Product Management and Marketing Body of Knowledge* as editor-in-chief with MIT professor Steven Eppinger. Greg has also taught product management at DePaul University's College of Computing and Digital Media.

As a former board member of the Business Architecture Guild, Greg actively collaborated on the *BI-ZBOK Guide*, and has since lent his product management expertise to a growing list of other professional bodies of knowledge, including the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers' (IEEE) first *ITBOK* and the latest *BABOK Guide*. Greg regularly contributes to a wide variety of industry publications and maintains a popular blog on [ActuationConsulting.com](http://ActuationConsulting.com).

# Contributing Authors

## **Ron Lichty**

### *Principal, Ron Lichty Consulting*

Ron Lichty advises and consults with companies on how to make their software development “hum.” To untangle the knots in companies’ software development processes, he often takes on the role of acting or interim Vice President of Engineering. He also frequently trains and coaches teams and managers in Agile, a development methodology in which he is an expert. Ron is the co-author of the acclaimed Addison-Wesley book, *Managing the Unmanageable: Rules, Tools, and Insights for Managing Software, People and Teams*. Learn more about Ron at [ronlichty.com](http://ronlichty.com).

## **Matt Jackson**

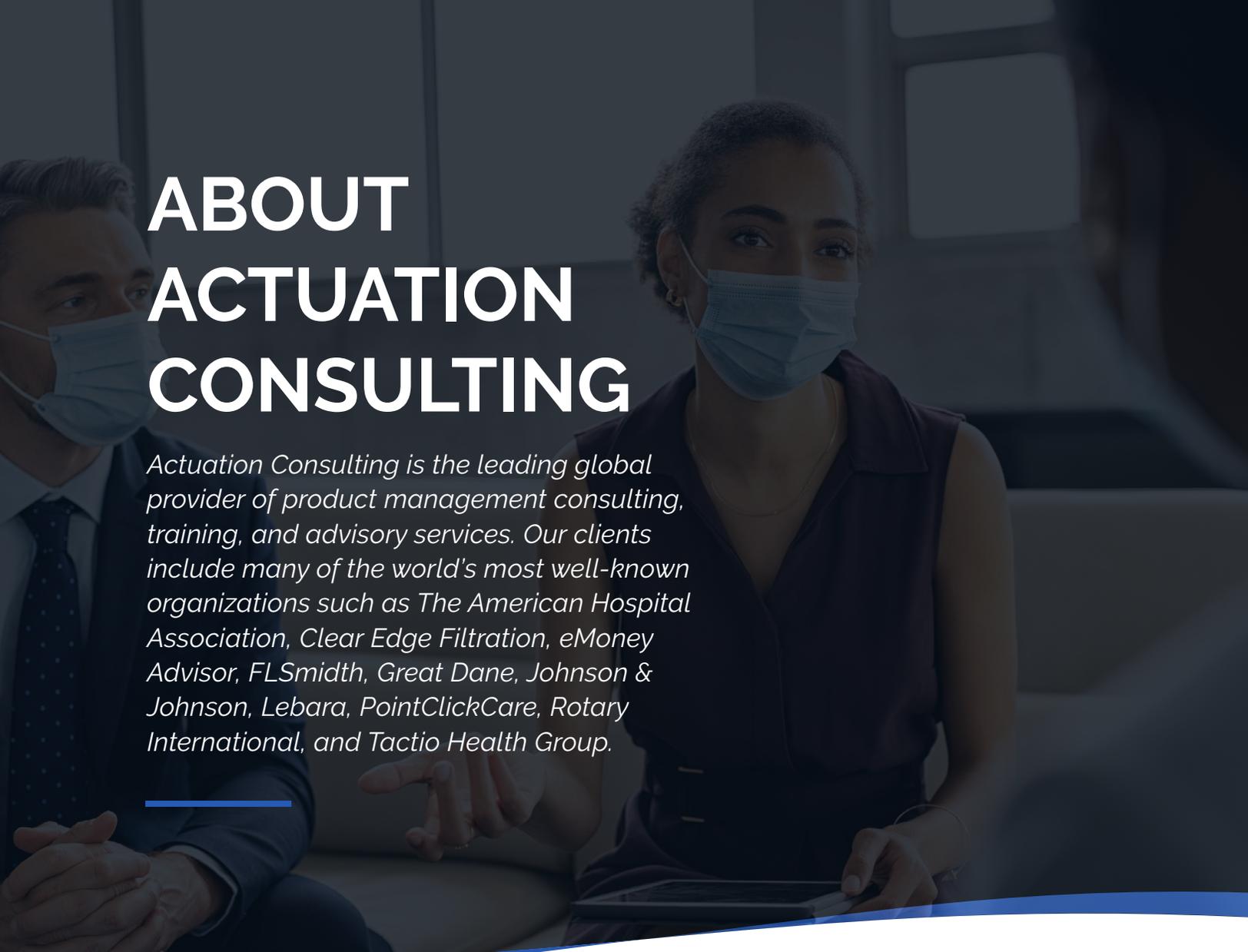
### *President, OpsVantage*

Matt Jackson specializes in high-risk projects as well as operational and project turnarounds for software companies. During his 15 years in practice, Matt has served clients such as Microsoft, Corbis, Casey Family Program, Thomson Healthcare, Precor, Vertafore, and Amazon. In addition to his consulting work, he has written for Fawcett Technical publications and served as an expert reviewer of the project management section of *The Guide to the Product Management and Marketing Body of Knowledge*. Learn more about Matt at [ops-vantage.com](http://ops-vantage.com).

## **Steve Starke**

### *Partner, Actuation Consulting*

Steven Starke is a recognized expert in the field of project management and the highly regarded author of *S.T.O.P: The Project Management Survival Plan*. Steve has over 15 years’ experience leading product, program, and project management organizations and has worked with organizations of all sizes – from small startups to multi-billion dollar corporations. His industry experience spans consumer products, medical devices, global IT infrastructure, healthcare analytics, and software development.



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As a product management consulting and training organization, we conduct continuous market research to discover the factors that differentiate high-performance product teams from the rest of the pack. Our data-driven approach to product management allows us to accurately assess your product management function and your product team's performance.

We offer a full range of product management and product team assessments. Let us help you identify your product management team's strengths and developmental opportunities and lay the baseline for continuous improvement.

## **Product Management Advisory Services**

Some product management challenges do not require full onsite support. Our seasoned consultants are experienced at collaborating with executives and team members remotely. Let us share our knowledge of industry best practices to augment your team and improve results. We offer a full range of product management advisory services ranging from coaching and mentoring to advice on overcoming a particular business challenge.

## **Onsite Product Management Consulting**

Many organizations struggle to optimize their product management team's performance and implement processes and best practices that will drive sustainable results. Our product management consultants can help you overcome these challenges and improve your product management team's performance so you achieve better business results.

We offer a full suite of product management services ranging from interim product management leadership to consultation on a particular business challenge.

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Specifically designed for product management professionals, this training course focuses on improving your effectiveness as a product manager. Our expert instructors explain critical components of product management, define and clarify the role of a product manager, provide tools and techniques that are proven to increase product managers' performance, and help managers effectively engage with their product team counterparts. The class includes a comprehensive workbook, graduation certificate, and our bestselling Take Charge Product Management Toolkit©. This toolkit ensures that you can quickly implement what you've learned at your organization.

Corporate clients frequently choose this course because it clarifies the role of a product manager, helps create a common lexicon, and provides a framework for organizing the entire product management team.

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We developed this course specifically to address the unique challenges faced by software and digital media product management professionals. The class clarifies a product manager's role, helps create a common lexicon and provides a framework for organizing the entire product management team in a high-tech environment.

This class includes a comprehensive workbook, graduation certificate, and our bestselling Take Charge Product Management Toolkit©. The toolkit is an invaluable resource that will help you implement key course concepts at your organization.

## BOOKS

- Take Charge Product Management (2nd Edition) by Greg Geracie
- The Guide to the Product Management and Marketing Body of Knowledge by Greg Geracie and Steven Eppinger
- Managing the Unmanageable: Rules, Tools, and Insights for Managing Software People and Teams by Ron Lichty and Mickey Mantle

## TOOLKITS

- Take Charge Product Management Toolkit
- Product Management Essentials Multi-Year Product Strategy Clarifying Roles and Handoffs
- Project Management Survival Toolkit
- Project Management Essentials

## WORKSHOPS

- Agile
- Creating Value Through Collaboration
- Designing an Effective Product Management Process
- Effective Product Roadmap Development
- Managing Software People and Teams
- Metrics-Driven Product Management
- Optimizing User Experience Within the Product Organization
- Prioritizing Requirements
- Product Strategy Development



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