



# BUILD *for* BETTER

JT White

**The Practical Guide to Building  
Digital Companies, Products and Teams**

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**BY JT WHITE**

**B/SPUBLISHERS**

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*Dedicated to the loving memory of my first Mom, Deb White. She always wanted to write a book and so much of who I am is because of who she was. If anything I wrote here can inspire anyone even one-hundredth as much as you continue to inspire me, this was all worth it.*

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The company you  
build, **the culture  
you build**, is just  
another product.

And you need to  
approach **it in the**  
exact same way  
you approach  
building things in  
the digital world.

# Setting The Stage: Unlocking the Secrets of Product Success



**W**hen I first set out to write this book, it was intended to be a guide to understanding and becoming a Product Manager for the digital age. I was tired of trying to explain to people what it was that I actually did for work. More than that, though, I was tired of how drastically different Product roles could be from company to company. And I wrote that book. All of it.

What happened next was frustrating. I realized that most of what I'd written about, most of what I was most passionate about, was building the relationships, the teams, and the culture where great products can be built—even more than the products themselves. But then I realized that the company you build, the culture you build, is just another product. And you need to approach it in the exact same way you approach building things in the digital world.

Building a digital product and company is f\*\*king hard. Really, really hard. Making it even harder is the complete lack of understanding on how to go about actually building either one from all the angles one must consider. Equally difficult is that there is a plethora of

processes and methodologies that you are told you should use to be successful but often with little reason other than “big companies have succeeded building digital things this way,” which is a shit reason.

The past thirty years have seen disruption in the form of technological advancement in a way that we have never seen before. From net new inventions to the furthering of what was groundbreaking technology just ten years ago, businesses, and therefore their employees, have had to radically transform the way they approach problems. The roles and responsibilities of organizations and people alike are vastly different now from what they have been in the past.

In this version of this book, we will focus on the people charged with owning whatever your core product is, and the processes that built that product. That could take the form of Entrepreneurs, CEOs, COOs, Product Development, Product Management, Product Innovation, or any other nonsense title you might want to assign to someone who is trying to build something. The impetus for writing this book is not that we don't have good digital companies, products, or process, because in lots of cases we do. But how we approach building them from their very conception to launch is being done in a way that has not evolved to match the companies and products themselves. I would argue we have good digital products more out a lack of great digital products to reference. So, I wanted to look at how we do things to better understand why we are where we are.

We will explore the history of building things to understand the reasons behind the process today, explore the perception and the realities of being in charge of building a digital product and the associated actors and roles, and arrive at a place where we can

have better conversations as for how to push forward into a truly digital world where our process more directly mimics our products.

This book is written the way I and almost all of my colleagues and collaborators talk—like real people. I have read far too many business books that stand on ceremony and standard procedure instead of being transparent and honest. What does that actually mean? It means the following pages will be infused with curse words and likely far too many metaphors and oddly placed cultural references. This is done with great intention. It is time we stop taking ourselves so seriously and instead allow ourselves to be who we are. If any of the above gives you pause and offends your sensibilities, I tell you with great confidence that this book is not for you, so put it down. If you can handle a few adult words and want to get into the mud of how to have our business practices match our potential output, buckle in.

The glamorous 'Mad Men' view of sales culture is one of drinks and dinner, golf outings, and taking clients to shows where you simply reach into your illustrious toolkit and pull out a perfectly fitting object to solve their problem.

**But the truth is quite the opposite.**

# The Origin Story: Crafting a Book to Change How You View the Word “Product”

I lovingly refer to myself as an “Accidental Product Manager.” I started my career in sales and truly believed it was what I was meant to do. I have always had a love of people and the process of getting to a place of truly understanding what it is a person needs.

Herein lay my issue. The glamorous “Mad Men” view of sales culture is one of drinks and dinner, golf outings and taking clients to shows where you simply reach into your illustrious toolkit and pull out a perfectly fitting object to solve their problem. But the truth is quite the opposite. More often than not, I found myself in a “square peg round hole” scenario rather than “let me wrap this up for you.” So, in the absence of a perfectly manufactured out-of-the-box fix, I found myself constantly trying to force multiple products into a single one that was a better fit for my clients.

As I have come to learn after ten-plus years building digital products, those kinds of salespeople are both the biggest asset you have at your disposal and the very specific reason you take up drinking.

By always pushing the edges of products I was constantly putting pressure on the organization to build and maintain subsets of quality products on top of the “core” offering. But as I was always assigned a vertical or territory to which I needed to sell, I was left asking myself, “Why do we have this client segment if we don’t have products they actually want to use?” or more selfishly, “How am I supposed to hit my goals with this garbage my customers can’t use?”

I was lucky enough to have the faith (and mostly patience) of multiple leaders who allowed me to venture into the world of creating solutions for my customers based on truly defining their needs and then having the resources to build those solutions out for larger consumption.

The first product I ever built was a website for online rap battles. I was sixteen and an avid hip-hop fan. Chat rooms and bulletin boards were just becoming the norm online. I moved frequently as a kid and often I found myself an outcast among my peers. The internet allowed me to connect with like-minded people and build a community from afar. When my favorite hip-hop website became overcrowded and impossible to navigate, a friend of mine from the site and I decided to build our very own playground and invite only our favorite people. We used out-of-the-box VBulletin software and slowly built a small community of underground artists and fans. Eventually I was able to sell the site as a test bed for up-and-coming artists. I made no money off the sale, and the only lesson I learned at the time was that the music industry was awful. But it struck a chord in me.

Since that time, I have built just about every iteration of a digital product you can imagine. I launched websites and streaming services