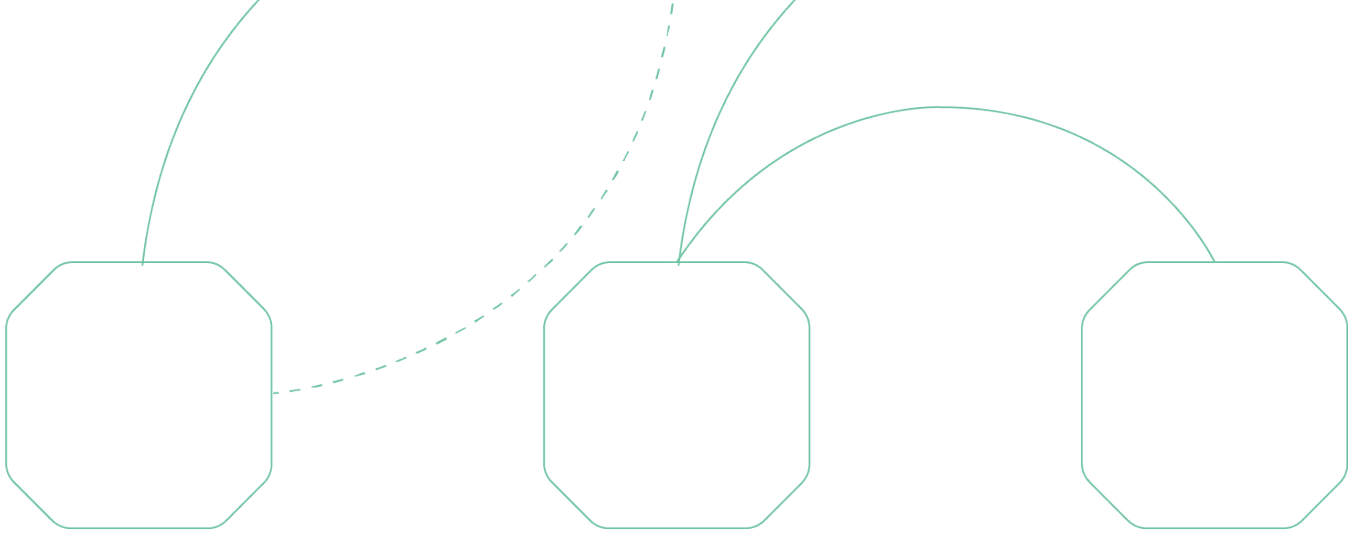


Creating product roadmaps that drive innovation & differentiation

A Step-by-step process



genul



Get more value from your product roadmap

If you have anything to do with building software, you've probably spent some time thinking about product roadmaps. Whether you're a software engineer, team leader, product manager, or business decision maker, there's value in looking to the future of your product.

However, most roadmaps don't deliver nearly the value they should. Most organizations know instinctively that a roadmap is a good thing—even an essential one. But it's easy to underinvest in product vision when there's so much to deal with in the here and now. Roadmaps can devolve over time into little more than a roster of support-ticket grievances and “helpful” customer suggestions. Or they get flattened in the inter-departmental back and forth. If a roadmap is merely a list of incremental improvements, your product will tend to fall further and further behind the curve.

A roadmap that rises above these issues can become one of your company's greatest assets—the vision that will differentiate you from competitors and allow you to create a better world for people who use your product. Given the right degree of focus, a roadmap can also help you diagnose and fix technical, operational, and cultural issues.

Four characteristics of a great roadmap

We've built software with organizations of many maturity levels, from brand-new startups to enterprise incumbents. And regardless of size, we've observed a number of things that tend to make roadmaps truly valuable. Great roadmaps tend to be:

1. Customer-centric—to a degree

The increasing focus on customer needs in software development is a great thing. Design thinking and UX innovation have contributed to dramatic improvements in technology value. However, there's such a thing as listening to your customers too much, especially when it comes to constructing your roadmap. Customer interviews and feedback are great sources of ideas for feature and support improvements. However, they are immersed in their day-to-day challenges—not envisioning the next disruptive software innovation. That's what they're looking to you for.

You must both understand the clients pains and look beyond operational minutiae to the next big thing.

2. Aligned to an overall strategy

A list of features is not a vision, even if their implementation seems far off. The roadmap should ultimately point to your organization's big-picture business value, which is likely bigger than even a single product. There may be many steps to get there but having a clear idea of the path—even if the latter stages are less detailed—is the only way to arrive at the destination you seek. Think big, and then even bigger than that.

3. Intentionally aspirational

Too often, roadmaps are developed with an eye to what's impossible—instead of what's possible. That means when technology debt or skills gaps are uncovered, the dependent feature is crossed off the list. However, in the long run, your product is only going to succeed if your organization is ready to

achieve the big vision. There are always constraints. A roadmap should inspire creative thinking about how to overcome them rather than shrinking to the size of today's limits.

4. Representative of multiple viewpoints

While it's common for roadmaps to be owned by the product management team, it's essential to include people from across the organization—preferably including engineering, marketing, finance, support, and operations -

with a collective attitude of creating a shared vision and overcoming challenges together.

Building buy-in

One reason roadmaps sometimes get shoved to the side is that, especially done properly, they consume significant amounts of time and attention. And in today's world, people are usually busy just doing their job. That's why it's key for the organization to view an effective roadmap as a worthwhile investment and reward people for participating. Here are a few things we've found effective in building enthusiasm for the process:

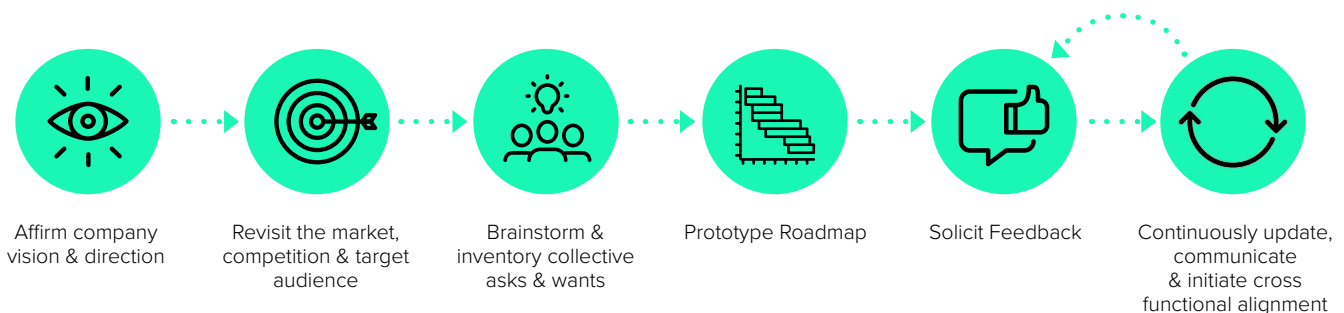
Getting Started

- Identify and engage key stakeholders across the organization. Use a mix of 1:1 engagement and group sessions.
- Actively listen to their ideas and communicate how their work is shaping the company's vision.
- Apply the 80/20 rule. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Embrace that the roadmap will evolve as the dialogue amongst different teams influences each other's thinking and vision for the product or service.
- Invite broad participation and raise visibility through surveys, all-hands meetings, and so on—but keep the focused team in control of progress.

Engaging Effectively

- Show buy-in from the top—ensure company leadership participates as much as possible and demonstrates an attitude of open-minded creativity.
- Make the time commitment clear – a typical process to draft your roadmap and get initial feedback should not last more than 3-4 weeks.
- Free up time and space in participants’ schedules and reward them for participating—even if it’s just with recognition for their service.
- Empower participants to think big and experiment with cool new ideas and technology and give them resources to learn what they need to about emerging options.
- Commit investment to solving the challenges identified by the roadmap.
- Be on the lookout for “Constrained thinking” I refer to these as Jersey barriers which represent assumptions and constraints to innovation. A conspicuous example would be Tech Debt.

Six steps to a better roadmap



Ready to challenge your roadmap to ensure it’s aligned with your overall strategy? Here’s an overview of a typical 4-week process we use at GenUI—a roadmap of a roadmap, if you will. The emphasis is on speed, creativity, and big-picture thinking. Keep things loose and agile, especially at first.

Step 1. Affirm company vision and direction

A short meeting on this topic can provide a refresher on the ultimate destination and create a common starting point. By focusing on the north star, it pulls people out of their day-to-day and helps them focus on big-picture objectives.

Step 2. Revisit the market, competition, and target audience

Invite members of the roadmap team to share existing content and knowledge. Again, this can be a short meeting and doesn't require endless preparation. It's just about revisiting key economic and market trends as they stand today, and helps people take a glance outside the organization to see what others are doing. At the end of the meeting, everyone should be aligned on what they want to achieve for customers.

Step 3. Brainstorm and inventory collective asks and wants

Group sessions that enable different viewpoints create critical dialogue for shared understanding. Taking no more than 2 hours, brainstorm a giant wish list combining input from customers, sales, product management, engineering, and company leadership. Miro or Mural are great facilitation tools for digital brainstorming sessions. If team members can generate lists in advance, this will accelerate the conversation.

Breaking these sessions out by role--or even doing them on a one-on-one basis--can result in more impactful insights. It can help build trust and give people a voice who otherwise would not be heard.

By removing the possibility that their comments will be personally identified with them, they are likely to feel more comfortable being honest.

Step 4. Build and share a prototype roadmap

Rapidly construct a roadmap that jumpstarts the process and gives you something to share and get feedback on to refine. Just as with agile software development, it's better to have something to react to and build on than try to perfect it before anyone sees it. Then, the roadmap can be shared one-on-one with key stakeholders to refine it and identify potential issues or blockers. Encourage participants to have conversations with peers about the roadmap on an informal basis, too.

Step 5. Act on feedback

Bring the draft to the group to refine based on feedback. This is typically done in a small number of hour-long sessions, giving participants time to think and recharge in between. They will have been thinking about this since the workshop and will have refinements based on their own thinking and informal conversations with peers throughout the organization. A final round of feedback can be

gathered over email. It's important not to be overly aggressive with the roadmap timeline in the short run (which we define as the first two quarters of the roadmap). Provide plenty of room for teams to digest and execute the goals.

Step 6. Continuously update and communicate

Work across groups to solicit feedback and update the roadmap based on emerging customer feedback, new market trends, and evolving business goals. Ensure that the roadmap remains front and center in ongoing conversations.

The value of a partner

Ideally, building a roadmap is a fast, creative, agile process, not a heavyweight slog. Still, doing it right does take time and energy. There can be tremendous value in collaborating with an experienced partner during the process—and not just to lighten the load.

An experienced software development shop should be able to bring a predefined roadmapping process to accelerate results, one that has been proven with many past clients.

Even more valuable than this acceleration is the objective point of view a partner can offer—one that is removed from organizational politics. This new perspective can also add creative ideas into the mix to help spur innovation. Additionally, software development specialists typically have a broad range of technical expertise and can offer solutions you may not already know about, as well as perspectives from outside your industry. Finally, if you think there's even a chance you might use their services to execute the roadmap, you'll get more value from the relationship the earlier you bring them in.

If you're considering refreshing your roadmap and want a helping hand, give us a call. We have a well-defined process and broad expertise that can help you not only define your north star but achieve it faster.