Strategic Product Roadmapping: How to Develop Plans that Work

Tom Sherbet, Business Consultant, Sopheon
Today, many leading companies are using roadmaps to visualize innovation efforts across the enterprise, allowing them to better plan for and make decisions about the future. Through the process of roadmapping, organizations can exchange up-to-date strategic planning information about emerging technologies, customer needs, market demands and competitive information.

Tom Sherbet, Sopheon business consultant and strategic roadmapping expert, answers these commonly asked questions about how a combination of roadmapping software and best practices can help ensure that your organization’s product development and technology strategies deliver long-term organic growth.

Questions

We don’t have a roadmapping process. How do we get started? ................................................................. 4

Is it recommended to introduce roadmaps gradually or to make a complete, enterprise-wide change? ........... 4

Is it possible to start with capability roadmaps, and then evolve the process to include market and technology roadmaps? .................................................................................................................................................................................. 4

What is the typical lead time to get a first cut view of a roadmap in a large corporation? ............................. 5

How long does it take from starting the process until an organization has a workable roadmapping system? ...... 5

How do I manage large-scale roadmaps (hundreds of products connected to hundreds of technologies)? .......... 5

How do I make sure our strategic roadmaps are aligned with our ongoing operational plans? Do the two types of plans ever interact? .............................................................................................................................................................................................................. 6

What staff roles should be using roadmapping software, i.e., who would contribute the most and get the most out of it? .................................................................................................................................................................................................................................................. 6

Traditional roadmapping practices have the key players in the same room, using “sticky notes” to track their decisions. How does your tool facilitate group collaboration when you have global teams? .................. 6

Is it possible to build a roadmap in Microsoft Excel® and then bring it into Vision Strategist? ....................... 7

How do you integrate the supply chain into your roadmaps? ................................................................. 7

How often do companies tend to update their roadmaps? ............................................................................ 8

What process can be used to maintain strategic alignment throughout the year? How do you keep the strategic plan alive? ........................................................................................................................................................................................................................................ 8

What are the biggest hurdles or constraints to an effective and sustainable roadmapping process? .......... 8
**Question:**
We don’t have a roadmapping process. How do we get started?

**Answer:**
The best - and easiest - way to start a roadmapping process is to educate your organization on process fundamentals and roadmapping best practices. This can be accomplished through workshop sessions. Once a foundational understanding is established among stakeholders, automating the process with software will provide the structure and efficiencies required to ensure your roadmapping effort has the desired business impact. Over time, it will help to institutionalize the roadmapping discipline. For example, the software will aid you in creating basic templates for process deliverables and help standardize your roadmapping approach. It can “force” you to start thinking about future markets, products and technologies in a structured way. With software, you’ll be able to implement best practice elements in your deliverables and process from the get-go. The templates enable team members to focus on the information you would like to see, and provide a level of control over gathered information that you wouldn’t have in free-style Microsoft® Word documents or PowerPoint® slides. Lastly, software will enable you to build and maintain roadmaps much more efficiently than is possible using a manual approach.

**Question:**
Is it recommended to introduce roadmaps gradually or to make a complete, enterprise-wide change?

**Answer:**
Our experience suggests that it’s important for you to walk before run. It’s always best to start in the area where you have the most urgent business need. Avoid introducing too many change mechanisms at once. You should clearly define which decisions you want your roadmaps to address and which value streams you want to focus on. This practice will help you to tie your process closely to those value streams and derive maximum benefit from your efforts.

**Question:**
Is it possible to start with capability roadmaps, and then evolve the process to include market and technology roadmaps?

**Answer:**
Indeed, this is a very common way to get started. I always encourage customers to begin by incorporating the data they already have and then branch out from there. Companies often struggle with assessing long-term customer or market trends, but they do know where their products are headed and have good insight into specific customer needs in the short term. So, they often start by collating what they know, and they grow into the rest of it. You don’t have to have an end-to-end roadmap to extract
One of the great things about Sopheon’s Accolade® Vision Strategist™ tool is that you can input pretty raw data, and it will very quickly help you identify the gaps or areas that need strengthening. The software also prompts you to think about your markets differently. It actually helps you mature into a new way of thinking.

**Question:**
What is the typical lead time to get a first cut view of a roadmap in a large corporation?

**Answer:**
A roadmap is never done; it's a rolling window into your strategy. To develop an initial rough-cut roadmap - depending on what you know about the future of your products, customer needs, upcoming regulations, etc. - typically will take as little as a day or two. But you need to remember that a roadmap is not a chart. It is the outcome of a larger process, the representation of an ongoing collaboration around the future capabilities of your business. A mature roadmapping process could take years to develop. To create sustainable value for your business, you should always be looking forward and collaborating across functional boundaries to make sure you're aligned with your market vision, your product capabilities, and your technology enablers. Again, the roadmapping process is never really done. Your business is always changing. And because of that, roadmapping is a never-ending journey.

**Question:**
How long does it take from starting the process until an organization has a workable roadmapping system?

**Answer:**
In our experience, companies that want to generate value from a system quickly embrace a very simple approach and are able to get up and running within one month. They create a baseline framework and start with roadmaps that are connected across the basic functional boundaries - marketing, technology, and product. I have also worked with customers who’ve wanted to take a somewhat more aggressive approach, pulling in a lot of decision-based metrics and connecting roadmapping very deeply into their gated processes. Obviously this is going to take a little longer - most likely a four-to-six-month time frame to really get it right. Regardless of the adoption path you choose, it's important that the pace makes sense for your company’s maturity level and your business model. You should deliberately put stakes in the ground as indicators of what level of maturity you want to reach so you can get even more value in the future as you and your organization absorb changes to your processes.

**Question:**
How do I manage large-scale roadmaps when I have hundreds of products connected to hundred of technologies?

**Answer:**
Scaling the visualization aspects of a roadmap is always a challenge. Very large and complex roadmaps, simply put, look horrible no matter what method or tool you use for creating them! My advice is to break up the data into meaningful and manageable chunks so that you can create a significant story that’s not too big. This means you don’t have a hundred technologies on one roadmap, but rather that you break it up into five to ten technologies and center the roadmap on a single product line or market area. When the components reach into the hundreds, it’s often useful to aggregate them into an analysis with reporting capabilities so that you can make sense of the data. This is a particular area of strength for our Vision Strategist software. We take a database approach to roadmapping. Our solution makes it simple to aggregate data at a high level, but also offers drill-down capabilities so that the views are meaningful.
Question: How do I make sure our strategic roadmaps are aligned with our ongoing operational plans? Do the two types of plans ever interact?

Answer: The simple answer is “Yes.” However, a more important question than the question of “DO they interact?” is “WHEN do they interact?” The value of a roadmap comes from reaching as far into the future as possible, and the right time to connect a project in Vision Strategist to a project in Accolade Process Manager™ is when you begin assigning resources to that project - perhaps in one to two years. At that point, it’s important to do a deeper-level analysis on the project, and then build a business case for it. This includes cross-functional scoring to make certain that the project will succeed in a gated process. When the project moves into the process, data is synchronized back to the roadmaps to ensure there are no duplicate entries. Collected data is typically flowed back through the process deliverables to the roadmaps, allowing you to see the connections and any strategic gaps that may be created as projects move through the product pipeline. Another critical juncture where you see connections happen between the roadmap and the pipeline of development projects is when you make prioritization decisions in your annual operating plan or your budgeting cycles for the next fiscal year.

Question: What staff roles should be using roadmapping software, i.e., who would contribute the most and get the most out of it?

Answer: Typically you have a small subset of users who really “own” the product strategy, and they are tasked with connecting technology plans out of R&D with product plans and market needs. As such, they have a more significant role in the system and are what we call “roadmap stewards.” They might be in a strategic role or an architect role, and they typically are in marketing, product management or a technology leadership position. However, there are many people within these groups who will contribute important information to maybe one or two roadmaps. They will be lighter users of the system. You can go down as deeply into your organization as you’re willing to distribute the capability. Of course, the more deeply you distribute it, the more value you’ll get over time.

Question: Traditional roadmapping practices have the key players in the same room, using “sticky notes” to track their decisions. How does your tool facilitate group collaboration when you have global teams?

Answer: There are really two questions here - one around collaboration and the other around facilitation of group sessions.

Regarding collaboration and the “sticky note” exercises you refer to, Sopheon offers another software module - namely, our Accolade Idea Lab™ idea development software - that is better designed to collect the raw data that emerges when you’re collaborating across functional boundaries during ideation, and build on those ideas through virtual interaction. But soon after those collaborative sessions, you’re going to want to close the gap between brainstorming on whiteboards and a few Word documents with broad descriptions, and more structured roadmaps. This is where Vision Strategist comes into play. The tool acts as a bridge between the unstructured whiteboard sessions and the roadmaps themselves. By distilling output from brainstorming sessions into tangible roadmaps, your team can begin to get more specific and structured around how everything fits together over time. This, in turn, allows you to start making better-informed strategic decisions, because those decisions are formulated within the context of more complete, current data. Some of our customers are, in fact, aiming to get out of the whiteboard mentality and transfer that knowledge into a centralized database that everyone involved in the
process can access. They’re looking at Vision Strategist to help them with that bridging process.

Vision Strategist can facilitate both remote and non-remote group sessions. One of the software’s principal advantages is that it drives a group to a more “actionable” place. It helps group members ask the right questions and causes them to be more specific in defining products, in determining the time needed to take those products from ideation through development to commercialization, and in establishing the metrics to gauge success.

Once you have created your roadmaps, the software can facilitate live, collaborative, global team sessions when used in conjunction with web-sharing technologies. Because of the way the system is structured - a combination of the shared database and the fact that roadmaps can be shared and updated - it actually reduces the amount of whiteboard time needed. The visualization and drag-and-drop capabilities of the system can provide the same experience with remote users as a “sticky note” or whiteboard session, and team members can more easily collaborate on all the moving pieces. You also need to remember that the roadmaps are all stored in a centralized database. As a result, various sites around the world can access the content and comment back on it, provide an alternative capability, create their own roadmaps and link to them, etc. This dialogue reduces the need for live sessions.

**Question:**
*Is it possible to build a roadmap in Excel® and then bring it into Vision Strategist?*

**Answer:**
Absolutely. Many of our customers create their roadmaps in Excel, share them with their customers or supply chain, receive the amended files back, and then import them directly into Vision Strategist. There may be some heavier users of the system who make the connection between roadmaps without using Excel, but as you distribute these roadmaps to a broader audience, you would expect that some users might just be using Excel to input the data. Later, once your roadmapping process has become more mature, you may be ready to enable a larger set of cross-functional users to update these roadmaps directly in Vision Strategist, rather than first relying on updates to the files in Excel.

**Question:**
*How do you integrate the supply chain into your roadmaps?*

**Answer:**
Traditionally, we’ll start with the company’s core market, product, and technology roadmaps as this is the easiest. When you take a closer look at the technology layer of the roadmap, it can in fact represent pure research, manufacturing technology, and many other different operational pieces of the business, including supplier technologies. In working with our customers, one of the key things we’ve found is that technology is most often not just delivered internally; it’s also delivered externally through the supply chain. A growing number of companies want to make sure that they are lock-step with their external strategic partners and that those partners are prepared ahead of time to deliver future product capabilities. Because of this, they will create supply chain roadmaps that intersect with other core roadmaps - technology in particular. You should proactively inject supply chain roadmaps directly from your suppliers into your own roadmapping tool, whether it’s through their giving you an Excel file or through your giving them direct access to the tool to enable sharing between the organizations.
Question: How often do companies tend to update their roadmaps?

Answer: By default you’re going to formally update your roadmaps at least twice a year: first as part of your strategic planning process, and then during your annual operations planning process as you think about the next year’s budget. As your roadmapping efforts mature, you’re going to want to tie updating roadmaps to your product development process, whether that’s Stage-Gate® or something else. This is actually what most successful roadmapper’s do. They make updates to roadmaps as deliverables within their gated processes, so when changes occur in the market, those changes can also ripple through their product plans. This practice will encourage your teams to have strategic dialogue in real time, updating roadmaps frequently, perhaps once a quarter. The roadmaps become dynamic, changing in response to ongoing market developments. The principal benefit is that you can react to new market conditions faster than your competitor.

Question: What process can be used to maintain strategic alignment throughout the year? How do you keep the strategic plan alive?

Answer: As I said before, you should tie roadmapping to your strategic planning process to make it as real as possible. Additionally, you should embed it into your current product development process. One good example is the Stage-Gate process. If you require roadmaps as a deliverable of your gated process, when you’re making near-term execution decisions about the projects in your development pipeline, you can also keep an eye on the implications of those decisions for the future. This can help your development teams do a better job of planning product evolutions, new market entries, the evaluation of new technologies, supplier capabilities, and so on.

Question: In your experience, what are the biggest hurdles or constraints to an effective and sustainable roadmapping process?

Answer: One of the biggest hurdles I see is that roadmapping too often is viewed as just a technology process. Technologists are required to look at long-term trend data to determine what impact these trends will have on the company. Given the nature of what the technologists do, getting ongoing participation and support for roadmapping from other functions inside the organization is often difficult. Roadmapping is most valuable when it involves marketing and the product development teams who can help make the process “real.” Roadmaps should also be measurable. You need to be very specific around what your requirements are for future products in order to determine what “success” looks like over the long term. Painting with very specific measurable attributes as opposed to broad brush strokes is essential if an organization plans to make decisions based on strategies emerging from the roadmapping process.
About the Author

Tom Sherbet, business consultant at Sopheon, has more than 10 years of experience developing and implementing roadmapping methodologies and strategic planning processes, including the integration of software support. He has played a key role in establishing best-in-class roadmapping solutions for major corporations in a range of industries. Tom previously worked at Honeywell International, where he spearheaded the company’s enterprise roadmapping efforts. Tom can be reached at tom.sherbet@sopheon.com.

About Sopheon

Sopheon (LSE:SPE) is an international provider of software and services that help organizations improve the business impact of product innovation. Sopheon’s Accolade® software suite is the first in the industry to provide end-to-end support for strategic product planning, ideation and innovation process execution. The suite’s Vision Strategist™ component automates the roadmapping process, allowing users to visualize and plan the future of products and technologies. Accolade’s Idea Lab™ component helps organizations generate, select and develop winning product ideas. Accolade Process Manager™ automates the product innovation process and provides strategic decision support for the management of product portfolios.

Sopheon’s software is used by top innovators throughout the world, including industry leaders such as BASF, ConAgra Foods, Corning, Electrolux, Honeywell, Northrop Grumman, PepsiCo, SABMiller and Total Petrochemicals.

Sopheon has operating bases in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, with distribution, implementation and support channels worldwide. For more information on Sopheon and its software and service offerings, please visit www.sopheon.com.