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Transitioning from PM101 to PM102, we excitedly jumped into turning Factor into a functioning product. However, it was the careful deliberation and willingness to pivot during this semester that enabled us to learn the most and to set Factor up for success. Our continuous learning process sometimes felt like a drag on forward progress, or seemed like two steps backwards, but ultimately this iterative nature helped advance Factor much more than a pre-set linear approach would have.

The primary change we made to Factor was bifurcating the business into a consumer play and a consulting play. After pursuing the consulting path further, we found a competitor that had played in a similar market to Factor. As that (now shuttered) company looked to license its software, we asked probing questions to understand why the company closed its doors, what worked well in the market, and what value the software offered. We discovered that the company struggled because of lack of sales and marketing effort; they were a self-described group of engineers building the product but not cultivating the business. These conversations made us think more deeply about our original offering and positioning, and as we contemplate these longer-term decisions, Doug and Derek came up with the idea for Personal Factor.

Personal Factor is the consumer play, democratizing 3D printing to enable anyone to customize a product that doesn't work quite right, to better suit them. We answered many questions we had about this new path (e.g., intake process, 3D printing materials selection, etc.), while others we're still ironing out (e.g., pricing, customer acquisition strategy, etc.). Lastly, we went through with a name change; we altered the spelling from Faktor to Factor, which was easier to spell and to remember.

As we embarked on the development process, we conducted many interviews to find the right developer. We navigated this process particularly effectively, carefully vetting candidates for ability and fit. To us, fit was the most important, and we passed on a few qualified candidates who lacked communication skills or receptivity for feedback. We ended up choosing two developers who our cofounder has worked with previously, and they turned out to be great. The process was not without its hitches, of course, but the developers produced high quality work, were open to our feedback, and met deadlines. The main issue we encountered was around the UX, but we worked through this together, utilizing a strategy we learned in class via the road-mapping caselet: explain the problem but don't dictate a solution! Their buy-in was crucial in getting us to the finish line and ensuring they were engaged in the work.

Through this process I also learned two lessons related to what I want to improve upon next time. First, make clear what your priorities are and what you are paying a developer to do and not to do; for instance, our developer wanted to animate the images on our landing page, and pursued this at the expense of other items. This experience exemplifies how important it is to have tightly scoped milestone-driven contracts, with clear objectives and passing criteria. When I work on developing my next product, I will aim to optimize these milestone-based contracts even further.

Second, I came to realize that smooth intuitive user experience tops the list of the most important elements of a new product. Sure, I had appreciated good user experience prior to the class, but this experience clued me in to what a differentiator a natural flow through the product means: the difference between the user finishing the registration or dropping off, the difference between the user returning for a second time and churning, or the difference between a repeat purchase and a lost sale. We experienced a convoluted UX flow after our initial build; fleshing this out with our developed earlier would have been a valuable use of additional time.

Through PM102 I've learned that, in many cases, PM is about the people more than it is about the product. My experience this semester boils down to people- and process-management. The essence of PM is motivating people, prioritizing, negotiating, taking responsibility, acknowledging team-members, explaining the why, resolving conflict... mostly, it was an exercise in leadership. PM102 helped illuminate areas where I'm strong and others where I need to develop further. These leadership skills will certainly help me not only in product management, but also in my future career regardless of function.

Via the course, I've filled in some gaps in knowledge too. I enhanced my understanding of software development (servers and backends) and enjoyed utilizing Professor Austin's developer consultants to quicken our path toward Factor's success. I also learned a ton about product marketing through Dave Gerhardt's guest lecture. I will take away his advice that you can never start marketing soon enough, that you shouldn't avoid marketing that doesn't scale, that you should build a pillar piece, and that most of marketing boils down to building trust and credibility. Lastly, I learned that when you demo a product, you should focus on the hero journey, accentuating the pain point and solution rather than over-detailing product functionality.

Overall, I find myself drawn to much that the PM role entails: organizing, prioritizing, negotiating, and, most of all, serving the user. Regardless of whether I'm in an official PM capacity or not in the future, I bet I will pursue PM-type work and will leverage my PM learnings. In fact, I already have in a few other classes!