



Managing Development Timelines in Assessment Tool Design

Background and Context

The [ASAP](#) initiative focuses on discovering and documenting assessment needs in adult education and workforce development and responding to those needs through the creation of online banks of literacy and numeracy tasks. These assessments are intended to serve adult learners, educators, employers, and researchers. Rather than functioning as a traditional academic study, ASAP is primarily a product development effort informed by a series of user experience (UX) studies. The development process has been grounded in extensive practitioner input, beginning with a multi-state needs assessment and continuing through iterative refinement of both assessment items and platform functionality.



The Challenge: Aligning Research-Driven Iteration with Development Timelines

As ASAP moved from needs assessment into active platform and item development, the team encountered challenges common to technology-oriented research projects that rely on external developers. Product development often operates according to fixed timelines, milestone-based contracts, and technical workflows that differ substantially from research-oriented approaches.

When external developers manage the pace of development, they may prioritize speed and delivery over research-informed iteration. In ASAP's case, this created pressure to approve or "sign off" on builds before the research team had sufficient time to test functionality, review assessment items, or gather practitioner feedback. Developer contracts frequently required decisions on tight timelines, even when the team felt additional UX testing was necessary. This tension raised the risk that the resulting tool could be clunky, incomplete, or misaligned with user needs.

Compounding this challenge was the difference in professional language and expectations between researchers and developers. Technical discussions were often framed in developer-centric terms that did not clearly map onto research goals such as usability, instructional relevance, or alignment with adult education “curricular language.” Without deliberate intervention, these misalignments threatened to undermine the iterative, user-centered approach that was central to ASAP’s design philosophy.

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The Strategy: Treating Assessment Development as Product Development

To address these challenges, the ASAP team made a deliberate shift in how they approached their role. Rather than operating solely as investigators, the team recognized the need to function as **research-informed product developers**. A critical strategy was hiring or designating a **Product Manager**. This role served as a bridge between research priorities and technical execution, translating UX findings and practitioner feedback into concrete development requirements while managing communication with developers.

Maintaining control over project management was equally important. The team learned that asking external developers to manage timelines and priorities often led to misalignment. By retaining ownership of project management, the research team ensured that decisions about pacing, testing, and refinement were driven by evidence and user feedback rather than contractual convenience.

Finally, the team developed a **product roadmap** alongside the overall project timeline. While the project timeline tracked phases of needs assessment, UX studies, and development, the product roadmap clarified what features and assessment components would be built, tested, refined, or deferred at each stage. This dual-planning approach helped set shared expectations and made trade-offs explicit across research and development teams.

Outcomes and Lessons Learned

By reframing assessment development as product development, the ASAP team was better able to balance research rigor with technical feasibility. Dedicated product management, clearer communication structures, and explicit ownership of timelines supported an iterative process in which practitioner feedback continued to shape both platform design and assessment content. The experience reinforced that technology-based assessment projects require staffing models, planning tools, and workflows that differ from those of traditional academic studies.

Key Takeaways

- **Maintain control over project management.** Do not delegate project management to external developers; doing so can result in misaligned priorities and premature design decisions.
- **Create a product roadmap.** In addition to a project timeline, clearly articulate what will be built, tested, refined, or deferred at each stage of development.
- **Plan for different staffing needs.** Technology-based assessment development often requires roles such as full-time product or project management that go beyond typical research staffing models.