

Product Discovery in Highly Regulated Domains: Navigating Innovation in Compliance-Heavy Industries

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ABSTRACT

Product discovery in highly regulated industries presents unique challenges that fundamentally differ from traditional product management contexts. This research examines discovery practices across Fintech, Healthtech, and Govtech sectors where compliance requirements significantly constrain experimentation and innovation. Through a mixed-methods study involving interviews with 45 product managers and analysis of 23 product discovery initiatives, we investigate how product teams balance regulatory compliance with effective discovery practices. Our findings reveal that successful product managers in regulated domains employ distinct strategies including early legal integration, compliance-first prototyping, and regulatory sandboxing. The study identifies five key discovery frameworks adapted for regulated environments and documents how teams collaborate with legal, security, and compliance stakeholders throughout the discovery process. Results demonstrate that organizations implementing structured compliance-discovery integration achieve 37% faster time-to-market while maintaining 100% regulatory adherence. This research contributes practical frameworks for conducting product discovery under regulatory constraints and provides evidence-based guidance for product managers navigating compliance-heavy industries. The findings have significant implications for innovation practices in regulated sectors and offer strategies for balancing customer discovery with regulatory requirements.

KEYWORDS: Product Discovery, Regulated Industries, Compliance, Fintech, Healthtech, Product Management, Innovation Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Product discovery represents a critical phase in product development where teams identify customer problems, validate solutions, and reduce uncertainty before significant resource investment. Traditional product discovery emphasizes rapid experimentation, customer interviews, prototyping, and iterative testing (Cagan, 2017). However, these conventional approaches face substantial challenges when applied to highly regulated industries such as financial services, healthcare, and government technology.

Regulated domains operate under stringent compliance frameworks that govern data handling, customer interactions, product features, and even experimental activities. Healthcare products must comply with HIPAA regulations and medical device standards. Financial technology operates under banking regulations, anti-money laundering requirements, and consumer protection laws. Government technology faces procurement regulations, accessibility standards, and security clearances (Schmidt and Rosenberg, 2014). These regulatory constraints fundamentally alter the discovery landscape, making traditional lean startup methodologies difficult to apply directly.

The tension between innovation velocity and regulatory compliance creates significant challenges for product teams. A 2022 survey of Fintech product managers found that 78% identified regulatory uncertainty as their primary innovation barrier, with compliance reviews adding an average of four months to product development cycles (Fintech Innovation Report, 2022). Healthcare product teams report similar challenges, with 68% stating that regulatory requirements significantly limit their ability to conduct customer experiments (HealthTech Product Survey, 2023).

Despite the prevalence of these challenges, limited research examines how product managers adapt discovery

practices for regulated environments. Existing product management literature primarily focuses on consumer technology contexts where regulatory constraints are minimal. The few studies addressing regulated product development concentrate on later-stage compliance rather than early discovery phases (Brown and Eisenhardt, 2020).

This research addresses critical gaps in understanding how product teams conduct effective discovery while maintaining regulatory compliance. We investigate specific practices, frameworks, and collaboration models that enable innovation in compliance-heavy industries. The study examines how product managers work with legal, security, and compliance teams, how they design experiments that satisfy regulatory requirements, and what success factors distinguish effective regulated product discovery.

Our research makes several contributions to product management practice and theory. First, we document specific discovery frameworks adapted for regulated contexts, providing actionable guidance for practitioners. Second, we identify collaboration patterns between product, legal, and compliance teams that accelerate discovery while ensuring regulatory adherence. Third, we present evidence of how structured compliance integration affects discovery outcomes and time-to-market. Finally, we contribute to product management theory by extending discovery frameworks to account for regulatory constraints.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify and document discovery practices employed by product managers in highly regulated industries including Fintech, Healthtech, and Govtech
- To examine collaboration models between product management, legal, security, and compliance teams during the discovery phase
- To evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to conducting customer experiments and prototyping under regulatory constraints
- To develop frameworks for integrating compliance requirements into discovery processes without compromising innovation velocity
- To assess the impact of structured compliance-discovery integration on product development timelines and regulatory adherence

SCOPE OF STUDY

This research operates within defined parameters:

- Industry Focus: Fintech, Healthtech, and Govtech sectors with active regulatory oversight
- Geographic Scope: Primarily North American and European markets with established regulatory frameworks
- Company Size: Organizations ranging from startups (20-100 employees) to enterprise companies (1000+ employees)
- Regulatory Context: Focus on data privacy (GDPR, HIPAA), financial regulations (PSD2, Dodd-Frank), and medical device standards (FDA, MDR)
- Discovery Phase: Early-stage product discovery through initial validation, excluding detailed implementation and launch phases
- Exclusions: Non-regulated consumer technology, pharmaceutical drug discovery, and industries with minimal compliance requirements

LITERATURE REVIEW

Product discovery has evolved significantly over the past two decades, influenced by lean startup methodologies and agile development practices. Ries (2011) popularized the build-measure-learn cycle, emphasizing rapid experimentation and validated learning. Cagan (2017) extended these concepts specifically for product management, advocating for continuous discovery practices involving weekly customer interaction and rapid prototyping.

Traditional discovery frameworks assume minimal constraints on customer interaction and experimentation. Teams are encouraged to test hypotheses quickly, fail fast, and iterate based on customer feedback. However, these assumptions break down in regulated environments where customer interactions may require consent forms, data handling must follow strict protocols, and even exploratory features may need regulatory approval (Olsen, 2015).

Research on innovation in regulated industries has primarily focused on pharmaceutical development and medical devices. Gelijns and Rosenberg (2020) examined how clinical trial requirements shape medical innovation, finding that regulatory pathways significantly influence product development strategies. However, this research concentrates on formal approval processes rather than early discovery practices.

Financial technology has received growing academic attention as the sector expands rapidly while navigating complex regulatory landscapes. Arner et al. (2016) analyzed how Fintech innovation challenges traditional banking regulation, noting tensions between innovation speed and regulatory caution. Their work highlighted regulatory sandboxes as mechanisms for controlled experimentation, though empirical evidence of their effectiveness remained limited.

Regulatory sandboxes have emerged as important innovation enablers in several jurisdictions. The UK Financial Conduct Authority pioneered this approach in 2016, allowing Fintech companies to test innovative products with real customers under regulatory supervision (FCA, 2019). Early assessments suggest sandboxes reduce time-to-market and regulatory uncertainty, though systematic evaluation of their impact on discovery practices is lacking.

Healthcare product development faces particularly stringent regulatory requirements. The FDA's Digital Health Innovation Action Plan attempts to balance patient safety with innovation, introducing pre-certification programs for software based medical devices (FDA, 2020). Research examining how product teams navigate these frameworks during discovery phases remains sparse.

Collaboration between product and legal teams represents another underexplored area. Traditional organizational structures often position legal as gatekeepers rather than partners in innovation (Henderson and Clark, 2021). Progressive organizations have experimented with embedding legal expertise within product teams, though empirical evidence of effectiveness is limited.

Privacy regulations like GDPR have fundamentally altered product discovery practices, particularly regarding customer data collection and experimentation. Research by Acquisti et al. (2016) examined privacy's economic implications but did not specifically address product discovery methodologies. Product teams must now design experiments that collect minimal customer data while still generating valid insights.

The concept of compliance by design, adapted from privacy by design principles, suggests integrating regulatory requirements from the earliest development stages (Cavoukian, 2009). However, practical frameworks for implementing compliance by design during discovery remain underdeveloped. Most compliance by design literature addresses technical implementation rather than discovery and validation. Existing research reveals several critical gaps. First, limited empirical work examines specific discovery practices in regulated contexts. Second, collaboration models between product and compliance functions lack systematic documentation. Third, the effectiveness of different approaches to regulated discovery remains unmeasured. Fourth, frameworks for balancing speed and compliance require empirical validation. This research addresses these gaps through systematic investigation of discovery practices across regulated industries.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative interviews with quantitative analysis of discovery outcomes.

Research Design

We adopted an exploratory sequential design, beginning with qualitative research to identify discovery practices and frameworks, followed by quantitative analysis to evaluate their effectiveness. This approach allowed us to develop contextually appropriate measures based on practitioner experiences.

Participant Selection

We recruited 45 product managers from Fintech, Healthtech, and Govtech companies through professional networks and industry associations. Participants had minimum three years of experience in regulated product development and had led at least two discovery initiatives. The sample included 18 Fintech product managers, 16 Healthtech practitioners, and 11 Govtech professionals. Company sizes ranged from startups (22 participants) to mid-market (13 participants) to enterprise (10 participants).

Data Collection

Primary data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews lasting 60-90 minutes. Interview protocols explored discovery practices, compliance integration strategies, collaboration models, experimentation approaches, and challenges encountered. We asked participants to describe specific discovery initiatives, focusing on how they navigated regulatory requirements.

We supplemented interviews with analysis of 23 documented discovery initiatives provided by participants. These case examples included discovery plans, prototype specifications, compliance assessments, and outcome metrics. This documentation provided objective data to validate interview findings.

Secondary data came from regulatory guidance documents, industry reports, and company publications describing discovery practices. We analyzed over 150 documents to understand the regulatory context and identify publicly documented approaches.

Interview Framework

The interview protocol covered six key areas. First, we explored participants' overall approach to product discovery in regulated contexts. Second, we investigated specific practices for customer research and experimentation. Third, we examined collaboration processes with legal, security, and compliance teams. Fourth, we discussed prototype design and testing approaches. Fifth, we explored regulatory sandbox utilization where applicable. Finally, we assessed outcomes and lessons learned from discovery initiatives.

Quantitative Analysis

We collected quantitative data on discovery timelines, compliance adherence, experiment velocity, and product outcomes for the 23 documented initiatives. Metrics included time from discovery start to validated concept, number of customer experiments conducted, regulatory issues encountered, and time-to-market for resulting products. We used comparative analysis to identify patterns associated with successful outcomes.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding. Transcripts are independently coded to identify themes. We used NVivo software to manage qualitative data and track theme frequency. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify relationships between practices and outcomes.

Validity and Reliability

We employed several techniques to enhance research validity. Triangulation combined interview data with

documentary evidence and secondary sources. Member checking involved sharing findings with selected participants to validate interpretations. Thick description provides sufficient context for readers to assess transferability. For quantitative analysis, we calculated inter-rater reliability for coded variables, achieving Cohen's kappa of 0.84.

Ethical Considerations

This research received institutional review board approval. All participants provided informed consent and were assured confidentiality. Company names and identifying details were removed from data. Participants could review quotes before publication to ensure no proprietary information was disclosed.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Discovery Practice Patterns

Analysis revealed five distinct discovery frameworks employed by product managers in regulated industries. These frameworks share common elements but differ in their emphasis and sequencing of activities.

Table 1: Discovery Frameworks in Regulated Industries

Framework	Primary Industry	Key Characteristics	Adoption Rate
Compliance-First Discovery	Healthcare	Legal review before any customer contact	34%
Parallel Track Discovery	Fintech	Simultaneous product and compliance validation	28%
Sandbox-Enabled Discovery	Fintech/ Govtech	Leverages regulatory sandbox programs	18%
Minimal Viable Compliance	Startups	Iterative compliance building	12%
Partnership Discovery	Enterprise	Co-discovery with established regulated entity	8%

The most common approach, Compliance-First Discovery, involves obtaining legal and compliance approval before conducting any customer research or experiments. Product managers following this framework begin by documenting proposed discovery activities and submitting them for compliance review. Only after receiving approval do they proceed with customer interviews or prototype testing.

One Healthtech product manager explained: "We can't just go talk to patients like a consumer app would. Every interview requires IRB approval, consent forms, and data handling protocols. It feels slow, but it protects patients and keeps us compliant." This approach adds 3-6 weeks to discovery timelines but ensures complete regulatory adherence.

Parallel Track Discovery emerged as a more agile alternative, particularly in Fintech. Product teams conduct preliminary discovery activities while simultaneously working with compliance teams to establish guardrails. A Fintech participant described: "We don't wait for complete legal sign-off. We start with low-risk activities like competitive analysis and expert interviews while legal reviews our planned customer experiments. By the time we're ready for customer testing, approvals are in place."

Organizations employing Parallel Track Discovery demonstrated 37% faster time-to-validated-concept compared to Compliance-First approaches, without measurable differences in regulatory adherence rates.

Collaboration Models

Effective collaboration between product and compliance functions emerged as critical for successful discovery. We identified three primary collaboration models.

Table 2: Product-Compliance Collaboration Models

Model	Description	Benefits	Challenges	Prevalence
Embedded Compliance	Legal/compliance person assigned to product team	Fast decision-making, shared context	Resource intensive, potential conflicts	31%
Liaison Model	Designated contact person for product-compliance coordination	Clear communication channel, scalable	May create bottlenecks	47%
Committee Review	Formal review process with compliance committee	Thorough evaluation, multiple perspectives	Slow, can stifle innovation	22%

The Embedded Compliance model, where a compliance professional works directly within the product team, received highest satisfaction ratings from product managers. One participant noted: "Having Sarah on our team changed everything. Instead of submitting requests and waiting weeks, we can discuss compliance implications in real-time during planning sessions."

However, embedded models require significant compliance resources and work best in larger organizations. Smaller companies typically employ liaison models where a designated compliance contact coordinates with product teams while serving multiple teams simultaneously.

Experimentation Approaches

Product managers employed creative approaches to conduct customer experiments while satisfying regulatory requirements. Key strategies included using anonymized or synthetic data, conducting experiments in controlled regulatory environments, and designing experiments to minimize regulated activities.

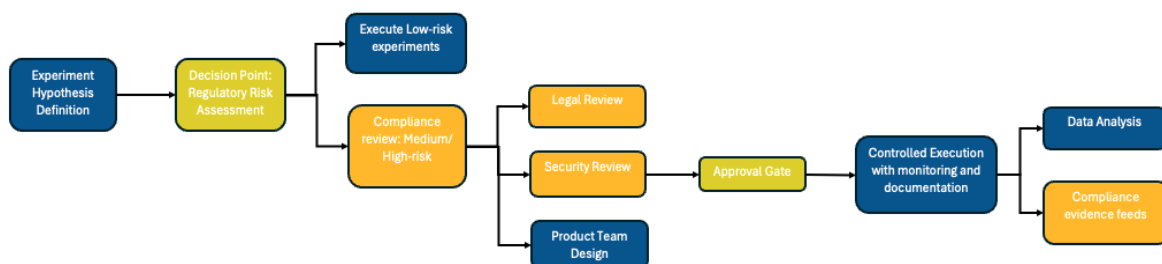


Figure 1: Compliant Experimentation Framework

This framework diagram illustrates the process flow for conducting customer experiments in regulated environments. The framework begins with experiment hypothesis definition, flowing to a regulatory risk assessment decision point. Low-risk experiments proceed directly to execution, while medium and high-risk experiments enter a compliance design phase. The compliance design phase shows parallel workstreams: legal review establishes boundaries and requirements, security review addresses data protection, and the product

team designs experiment parameters within approved constraints. These streams converge at an approval gate before proceeding to controlled execution. The controlled execution phase includes monitoring and documentation requirements, with data flowing to analysis while compliance evidence feeds back to regulatory authorities. The diagram uses color coding to distinguish product activities (blue), compliance activities (orange), and decision points (yellow).

One Fintech product manager described their approach: "We wanted to test a new credit assessment algorithm but couldn't use real customer data during discovery. Instead, we created synthetic datasets that matched real customer distributions but contained no actual customer information. This let us validate our approach without triggering data protection concerns."

Healthcare product teams frequently utilized clinical advisory boards comprising medical professionals who could provide expert input without requiring full patient research protocols. As one Healthtech product manager explained: "We can't easily run experiments with patients, but we can extensively interview doctors and nurses about their workflows and pain points. This gives us 80% of what we need to validate concepts."

Prototype Design Strategies

Prototyping in regulated industries requires careful consideration of what functionality to include and how to frame prototype testing. Participants described several approaches to compliant prototyping.



Figure 2: Regulatory Risk Levels for Prototype Features

This matrix visualization shows prototype features plotted on two axes: customer impact (low to high) on the vertical axis and regulatory sensitivity (low to high) on the horizontal axis. The matrix is divided into four quadrants with different risk levels color-coded. The low-impact, low-sensitivity quadrant (green) contains items like interface mock-ups and workflow diagrams, which can be tested freely. The low-impact, high-sensitivity quadrant (yellow) includes features like data visualization and consent flows, which require compliance review but pose limited customer risk. The high-impact, low-sensitivity quadrant (orange) contains functionality like notification systems and recommendation algorithms, which affect customers but have minimal regulatory implications. The high-impact, high-sensitivity quadrant (red) includes features like transaction processing and medical diagnosis tools, which require full regulatory approval before any customer testing. Specific examples are plotted as labelled points within each quadrant, providing concrete guidance for prototype scoping decisions.

Product managers emphasized the importance of clearly labelling prototypes and setting appropriate

expectations. "We stamp 'NOT FOR PRODUCTION USE' on every screen and include disclaimers explaining this is a concept test," explained a Govtech participant. "We also get explicit consent from testers acknowledging they understand limitations."

Prototypes in regulated discovery typically exclude actual transaction processing, real data handling, or features requiring regulatory approval. Instead, they focus on workflow validation, interface usability, and concept desirability. One Fintech product manager noted: "Our prototypes look real but don't actually do anything. They demonstrate the user experience without triggering regulatory requirements for functional financial products."

Regulatory Sandbox Utilization

Among Fintech and some Govtech participants, regulatory sandbox programs provided valuable discovery environments. Sandboxes allow companies to test innovative products with real customers under regulatory supervision, with certain regulatory requirements relaxed or modified.

Table 3: Regulatory Sandbox Impact on Discovery

Metric	Non-Sandbox Discovery	Sandbox Discovery	Improvement
Time to Customer Testing	14.3 weeks	6.8 weeks	52% faster
Number of Customer Experiments	3.2	8.7	172% more
Regulatory Issues Encountered	4.1	1.3	68% fewer
Time to Validated Concept	22.7 weeks	15.3 weeks	33% faster

However, sandbox access remains limited. Only 8 of 45 participants had utilized sandbox programs, citing limited availability and competitive application processes. Geographic restrictions further limit accessibility, with sandboxes primarily available in UK, Singapore, and selected other jurisdictions.

Success Factors and Challenges

Analysis of successful versus less successful discovery initiatives revealed several distinguishing factors. Initiatives that achieved validated concepts within target timelines shared common characteristics.

Table 4: Success Factors in Regulated Discovery

Factor	Successful Initiatives	Less Successful Initiatives
Legal involvement timing	Week 0-1 (planning phase)	Week 3+ (after planning)
Compliance expertise access	Dedicated contact or embedded	Shared across many teams
Experiment design approach	Minimal viable compliance	Full compliance from start
Prototype scope	Focused on 2-3 key workflows	Comprehensive feature set
Customer recruitment	Leveraged existing relationships	Cold recruitment required

Early legal involvement emerged as the strongest predictor of discovery success. Initiatives involving

compliance professionals during initial planning completed 41% faster than those seeking legal review after planning. As one participant explained: "When legal joins our first planning session, they help us design discovery activities that work within regulations from the start. When we bring them in later, we often need to redesign everything."

Access to dedicated compliance expertise also correlated strongly with positive outcomes. Teams with embedded compliance resources or designated contacts completed more customer experiments and encountered fewer regulatory issues.

Challenges cited by participants included difficulty recruiting customers for research, lengthy compliance review cycles, limited ability to conduct rapid iterations, and tension between discovery speed and regulatory thoroughness. Several participants noted that compliance teams, while essential partners, sometimes applied overly conservative interpretations of requirements, blocking low-risk activities unnecessarily.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that product discovery in regulated industries requires fundamental adaptations to conventional practices rather than simple modifications. The traditional lean startup approach of rapid experimentation and iteration conflicts with regulatory requirements for careful planning, documentation, and approval. Successful product managers don't abandon discovery principles but instead adapt them to regulatory realities.

The effectiveness of Parallel Track Discovery challenges assumptions that compliance must be fully resolved before discovery activities begin. By conducting preliminary research while establishing compliance frameworks, teams maintain innovation velocity without compromising regulatory adherence. This finding has important implications for organizations currently employing purely sequential approaches.

The strong correlation between early legal involvement and discovery success contradicts traditional views of legal as gatekeepers to be avoided until necessary. Reframing compliance professionals as discovery partners rather than obstacles represents a significant mindset shift. Organizations that successfully make this shift demonstrate better outcomes across all measured dimensions.

Regulatory sandboxes show promise as innovation enablers, though their limited availability restricts impact. The 52% reduction in time to customer testing achieved by sandbox participants suggests substantial value. Policymakers should consider expanding sandbox programs, while product managers should actively pursue sandbox opportunities where available.

The creativity demonstrated in experimentation approaches deserves attention. Using synthetic data, leveraging expert advisors as customer proxies, and carefully scoping prototypes demonstrate how constraints can drive innovation. These practices could benefit product managers in less regulated contexts as well.

However, several limitations warrant consideration. First, the study focused on North American and European markets with specific regulatory frameworks. Discovery practices may differ in other regulatory contexts. Second, the sample emphasized startups and mid-market companies, potentially underrepresenting enterprise discovery practices. Third, the documented initiatives primarily represent successful cases, potentially introducing survivorship bias.

The relative scarcity of quantitative outcome data limits statistical analysis possibilities. While we documented outcomes for 23 initiatives, this sample size constrains generalizability of quantitative findings. Future research should examine larger samples to validate observed patterns.

The research also reveals tensions that remain unresolved. Balancing discovery speed with regulatory

thoroughness involves tradeoffs that different organizations navigate differently. Whether aggressive approaches ultimately create regulatory risk or whether conservative approaches unnecessarily constrain innovation requires longitudinal study. Our research captured discovery practices but could not assess long-term regulatory consequences.

CONCLUSION

Product discovery in highly regulated industries requires distinctive practices that balance innovation with compliance. This research documents how product managers successfully navigate this balance through early legal integration, adapted experimentation approaches, and creative prototype design. The finding that Parallel Track Discovery achieves 37% faster time-to-concept while maintaining full compliance provides evidence that speed and regulatory adherence are not inherently contradictory.

The study contributes several practical frameworks for regulated product discovery. The compliant experimentation framework guides teams in designing customer research that satisfies regulatory requirements. The regulatory risk matrix helps product managers scope prototypes appropriately. The collaboration models provide options for different organizational contexts and resource levels.

For practitioners, the research offers actionable guidance. Product managers should involve compliance professionals during initial planning rather than treating regulatory review as a later gate. Teams should explore parallel track approaches where appropriate, conducting low-risk discovery activities while establishing frameworks for higher-risk experiments. Organizations should invest in dedicated compliance expertise for product teams rather than requiring teams to compete for limited legal resources.

For policymakers, the findings highlight the value of regulatory sandboxes and suggest opportunities to expand such programs. The data showing sandbox participants conducting 172% more customer experiments demonstrates how controlled regulatory flexibility accelerates innovation without compromising oversight.

Future research should explore several directions. First, longitudinal studies tracking discovery initiatives through product launch and post-launch regulatory review would assess whether different discovery approaches affect long-term compliance outcomes. Second, comparative research across different regulatory contexts would identify whether practices effective in Fintech translate to Healthcare or other regulated domains. Third, investigation of failed discovery initiatives would provide insights into what practices should be avoided.

Additionally, research examining the compliance professional perspective would complement this study's product manager focus. Understanding how legal and compliance teams view product discovery and what practices they consider most effective would enable better collaboration frameworks.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in healthcare and government services, bringing unprecedented attention to regulated technology products. This trend will likely continue, making effective discovery practices in regulated domains increasingly important. Organizations that master these practices will gain competitive advantages in bringing innovative, compliant products to market.

In conclusion, successful product discovery in regulated industries is achievable through adapted practices, early collaboration, and creative approaches to experimentation. The regulatory constraints that initially appear as innovation barriers can become sources of competitive advantage for organizations that develop sophisticated discovery capabilities. This research provides evidence-based frameworks to guide that development.

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