

MoSCoW prioritisation

“Decide what you want, decide what you are willing to exchange for it. Establish your priorities and go to work.” H.L. Hunt

The big idea

The MoSCoW technique is credited to Dai Clegg of Oracle Consulting and is a simple approach to determining priorities in time-limited projects. When you are working on projects, you need to be able to establish your priorities and levels of risk as the work proceeds. This approach also helps keep you focused on the needs of the beneficiaries or the stakeholders in the project. What distinguishes MoSCoW from other techniques is that you have to consider both what you want to include and what won't be included.

Purpose

The purpose of the tool is to help you prioritise the various elements of a project through using the acronym MoSCoW. (Ignore the Os; they are there to make the acronym work.) MoSCoW provides a basis for you to decide what will be done over the lifetime of a project. It considers those things that are essential and those which are nice to have but are less critical and can be omitted if necessary. The acronym stands for:

- Must haves – fundamental to project success
- Should haves – important but may not be critical to success
- Could have – can easily be left out without damaging the project
- Won't have – can be left out for now but may be done later> This is really a 'would like to have but won't have during the timeframe of this project'

These categories can be reviewed throughout the project and it is important that not everything falls into the 'must have' category. It is the other levels of prioritisation that give you wiggle room if the project changes or things start to slip. MoSCoW gives

you the mechanism for prioritisation but it can be enhanced by also considering the level of risk associated with project elements. Risk can be thought of in two ways:

- **Functional:** this is the level of risk to the project if a particular requirement is not met at the relevant time
- **Business:** this defines the level of risk to the overall business if a requirement is not met. An example of this might be staff not being adequately trained on a new box office system when it goes live, impacting on customer satisfaction and the organisation's reputation

The combination of MoSCoW and the risk analysis can help you both prioritise project requirements and have an early overview of the relative risks of these elements.

The tool

The following steps are suggested to use the MoSCoW technique:

1. Determine the project scope and timeframe
2. Write or draw each project element on an index card
3. Group the cards into piles of Must, Should, Could and Won't
4. Now assign values to each of the cards using the following scoring:

Priority	Functional risk	Business risk
Must = 5	High = 5	High = 5
Should = 3	Medium = 3	Medium = 3
Could = 1	Low = 1	Low = 1
Won't = 0		

5. Add the scores on each card, which will range from a 3 for Could/Low/Low to a 15 for Must/High/High
6. Reorder your stacks according to your weighted scores
7. Prepare your project plan based on the prioritisations you have identified
8. Monitor the project and revise the weightings as necessary as the project rolls out

Take the next step

Think of a small personal project you have coming up. It might be replacing a laptop or redecorating a room. Identify the project elements and use the MoSCoW and risk ranking method. What did the exercise tell you about how you approach projects? How easy was it to determine your Must, Could, Should and Won't? Was it hard to let elements go?

Top tips

- In assigning values to the cards, there is a danger of assuming that this is a precise science. Remember that these scores are still likely to be based on your value judgements
- To support making those judgements, use any available evidence you may have
- Bring in other people to help with the ranking process. If there is a project team, they should be part of determining the priorities
- Don't forget that the 'won't' category does not mean those requirements have to disappear forever. Find a way to capture and revisit them at a later date