

Must-have vs. nice to have: Understanding the MoSCoW method of prioritization



It's a great place to start with a project because understanding what needs to be delivered and what can be postponed can help you make better decisions. MoSCoW's simplicity is a great advantage; you shouldn't need any previous experience or preparation to grasp the concept.

Tackling a project involves prioritization. Factors such as time, staff, and budget impose limitations on what can be accomplished. Ranking objectives in terms of importance keeps everyone involved on the same page and makes completion manageable. Many organizations utilize the MoSCoW framework of prioritization. Originally created by an employee at Oracle, it began as a way to identify and focus on the most important requirements for projects with strict deadlines. Today, MoSCoW has expanded well-beyond the software development industry.

The acronym represents four different classifications of concerns:

- M stands for "must-haves"
- S stands for "should-haves"
- C stands for "could-haves"
- W stands for "will not have right now" (or "wishes")

"Since it necessitates company-wide, cross-departmental consensus on project goals, the MoSCoW method is very successful," says Veronia Miller, cybersecurity expert at [VPNoverview](#). "The project has a clearer path right away because the Must and Won't categories are non-negotiable. The Could and Should categories, which include elements that are normally major points of contention, are sorted out early in the process, and resources and manpower are appropriately allocated based on their priority level." Let's take a closer look at what the MoSCoW method entails.

Collaboration

People come to a project with various ideas about what actions need to be taken and what the end result should look like. The marketing department, for instance, may possess a significantly different viewpoint than the folks in IT. For progress to happen, all involved need to engage in some give and take.

The MoSCoW method involves ranking concerns. Reaching agreement about the importance of various issues and actions enables the construction of a framework. This blueprint guides progress and allows for the successful allocation of resources.

Classification

At the heart of this prioritization method is sorting the various stakeholder interests into appropriate levels. As one might expect, this process does not always go smoothly since people oftentimes have differences of opinion. However, working through disputes at this stage helps in the long run. Better to iron out matters from the get-go rather than risk disagreements emerging later that hold up progress.

At the top of the MoSCoW chain are things set in stone, the “musts.” This section consists of non-negotiable items critical to the project. Failure to accomplish objectives in this category has dire consequences, such as a due date not being met or a product failing to meet safety standards. Deciding what falls in this number-one tier often boils down to asking the question, “What will happen if we do not deliver on this particular thing?” If the answer is that the whole project will fall apart, you likely have a “must.”

The next stage of importance involves the “shoulds.” These items may not be quite as devastating if left out, but they are still quite critical to success. The project could go on without them, but the result would be inferior.

Think of the “coulds” as things that are nice to have but not mandatory. The impact of leaving them out of the overall plan is much smaller than at the first two priority levels. If must-have or should-have initiatives take longer or require more resources than expected, could-haves get axed.

The final category collects things that might be good down the line but need placement on the back-burner for now. For instance, a team charged with developing a company’s new website might love to include a blog on it but not have the budget to hire a professional writer at this time. Shelving certain wishes promotes focus on what truly needs to be done at the present time.

MoSCoW in action

Ask people familiar with MoSCoW what they like about this prioritization method and they will likely mention how it is easy to use.

“It’s a basic but effective method for high-level requirement prioritization, in my view,” says Jason Mitchell, chief technology officer at [Smart Billions](#). “It’s a great place to start with a project because understanding what needs to be delivered and what can be postponed can help you make better decisions. MoSCoW’s simplicity is a great advantage; you shouldn’t need any previous experience or preparation to grasp the concept. It prioritizes and defines expectations using human language rather than a precise scale of measurement.”

However, Mitchell also shares a concern common among MoSCoW users. He notes, “The obvious counter-argument is that it may be too simplistic and lacks sufficient detail about what should be done first. You may have reached an agreement on what must be delivered and a list of a half-dozen tasks, but which would you tackle first? Which tasks are dependent on one another? What is the location of your vital path? There will be several unanswered questions from the viewpoint of project management.”

Trevor Larson, CEO of [Nectar HR](#) (an employee recognition and rewards software developer), likewise

appreciates several aspects of MoSCoW prioritization. He states, “Ranking project requirements is something that is important for me to do before beginning because it helps me stay on track. It was fundamental when we were putting together the first iteration of our HR software because it gave us a point of reference every time there was a bottleneck or we had to make resource allocation decisions.”

For Colin C. Thompson of [Oligye Enterprises Business Consulting](#), MoSCoW’s attraction is how it allows a client to quickly understand and prioritize requirements.

“Most of the other methods allowed for ‘gray’ areas in prioritization and resulted in missed deadlines as non-critical requirements were deemed critical,” Thompson says. “By having clear rankings of ‘must’, ‘should’, ‘could’, and ‘wish’, the end-user focal and team could agree quickly and ensure that full focus only went to the highest-ranking requirements.”

That said, Thompson also points out a common concern.

“A drawback of the MoSCoW method is that there is no ranking of priorities that have the same importance. For example, there can be confusion and frustration when the team needs to identify which of the ‘must-haves’ should be developed first,” Thompson says.

How might MoSCoW work for you? Whether you’re a [project manager](#) or someone simply looking to improve your team’s prioritization skills, it pays to experiment with different methods to discover what yields the best results for your situation.