

Mission Critical: How to Prioritize Features with the Right Framework



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Introduction

It is practically a universal truth that the list of potential product features and enhancements (within which more ideas, suggestions, requests, and demands lurk beneath the surface) always exceeds the capacity of the product organization tasked with managing it.

The high demands on product organizations are nothing new. Our [2022 Product Management Report](#) found planning and prioritization initiatives to be one of the top three challenges for product management professionals.

A lack of strategic alignment, limited projected impact, and the threat of [“feature bloat”](#) are some reasons to pass on potential projects.

This adds up to product teams having to say “not now” or “not ever” to [a wide variety of stakeholders](#), including board members and executives, customer success managers, salespeople, and even customers. Delivering this bad news is never easy. It’s not all doom and gloom; we are here to help!

Prioritization Frameworks to the Rescue

Prioritizing the product roadmap backlog remains the job of the product organization. However, product teams also need to loop in stakeholders. It's far easier to secure buy-in on the decisions with a consistent, transparent, and inclusive process.

By incorporating [prioritization frameworks](#), figuring out what to build when removes much of the mystery and perceived subjectivity from the process.

Of course, prioritization frameworks vary quite a bit. You help your team members determine which type of framework supports the product launch. With the right framework and proper facilitation from the product organization, prioritization can be simple and—dare we say—enjoyable. It can bring participants closer and builds enthusiasm and momentum for the current project and the long-term product vision.

Focusing on What Matters

With no shortage of potential items competing for a slot in the product development pipeline, determining what to prioritize is more than gathering levels of effort and building a project plan to get them all done. The real challenge is scrutinizing the viability and impact of each item and considering whether it belongs on the list.

Prioritization requires a defined process and the proper framework to gather information for documentation.

Your organization's **product vision** guides your team's overall **product strategy**, which informs your **product roadmap**.

The goal, however, isn't just to create another rigid, step-by-step script. It should be to craft a process to evaluate each item concerning its benefit to the business. Moreover, members of your product team need to understand how and why items are getting prioritized. By exposing and sharing the rubric, the output of this prioritization activity becomes less open to criticism since it's now clear why something made the cut or was left off the list.

Strategize Beneficial Initiatives

To ensure your team always prioritizes the most beneficial initiatives, they must all be judged on their strategic significance to the product, its users, and the company's bottom line. Your organization's product vision guides your team's overall product strategy, which informs your product roadmap.

The roadmap serves as a tool to assist in identifying and prioritizing those items. Your roadmap will allow stakeholders to understand when and where changes occurred in the product strategy. This cross-functional communication provides product teams with stakeholder insight that supports the development of a product.

Good things start to happen when prioritization is done well. The output and reasoning are communicated clearly across the organization. The sales team can set expectations with customers and prospects. However, users understand what is and is not in the pipeline. Lastly, stakeholders will support and embrace the product roadmap, especially if it aligns with the company's overall strategy.

Empowering Product Managers

By design, product managers serve as gatekeepers, redirecting the fire hose of requests from going straight onto the sprint boards of developers and engineers. But always [saying no](#) doesn't make product managers particularly popular, especially when they haven't earned the trust of senior stakeholders.

Many product managers feel they are stubborn guardians of the roadmap. However, a culture that thoroughly emphasizes prioritization means product managers can focus on connecting potential work to the vision and strategy of the organization.

With prioritization, there is a documented system that other key players actively participate in to reach those crucial conclusions. The team can effectively evaluate each possibility based on mutually agreed-upon criteria. The criteria helps eliminate accusations of arbitrary overreach, grounding the subsequent product roadmaps and plans in a shared assessment.

After realizing the product managers are simply looking out for what's best for the product versus advancing their agenda, the rest of the organization can view the product team members as the altruistic bunch they truly are. And as a bonus, leaning on prioritization frameworks is an excellent cure for [shiny object syndrome](#), dissuading smitten executives from pursuing their pet projects when they don't contribute to hitting the product's or organization's goals and objectives.

And as the leader of these product teams, you can also sleep a little easier at night knowing consistent, thoughtful evaluations are occurring thanks to using these frameworks. You'll have the right ammo and supporting data to placate grumpy executives unhappy that their personal favorites won't make it into the next release or any release at all.

How This Guide Can Help You

This guide will help you better position the [prioritization](#) process within the organization and help your team identify and use the best prioritization frameworks based on each product's current state and its stakeholders' needs.

We'll walk you through:

- Some of the most effective, proven prioritization frameworks in use today
- Selecting the right framework for your team depending on your situation
- Best practices for getting buy-in on a new prioritization framework
- Overcoming the common challenges of implementing prioritization frameworks
- Using prioritization to build an impactful product roadmap
- Real-world examples of how product management teams leverage the right prioritization to improve their product strategy and deliver value to customers more efficiently

It Starts With Strategy

As much as your team members would love to wade into the [product backlog](#) to begin sorting and sifting and slotting, there's no way to assess a prioritized list's value to the organization without measuring it against an agreed-upon product strategy. And you can't devise a comprehensive strategy without an overall [business strategy](#) for the entire organization.

It's imperative to instill in your team the mindset that what's suitable for the **product** is suitable for the **company**.

Since strategy ultimately comes from the top, you must clarify and confirm the overarching corporate strategy as a product leader. You can act as the bridge between the boardroom and the whiteboard. Your role helps translate high-level goals and objectives into discrete targets and themes for each product.

It's imperative to instill in your team the mindset that what's suitable for the product is suitable for the company. But you can't figure that out unless the product strategy is clearly defined. Once that dynamic takes hold, prioritization frameworks, sessions, and outputs become nearly unimpeachable since they align with the same top-level goals the entire management team is working toward.

Five Steps for Creating a Product Strategy

STEP 01

Develop a high-level vision—the “why”—for creating your product, including the key problems it can solve and the value it will deliver.

STEP 02

Talk with your ideal users in different target markets, learning about their challenges.

STEP 03

Define your product’s strategic objectives, including those that match and advance the company strategy.

STEP 04

Translate these objectives into themes for your product roadmap.

STEP 05

Revisit the product vision to make sure the plan supports it. For a deeper dive, read our [Ultimate Guide to Product Strategy](#).

Now, assuming your team has a clear product vision and strategy, let’s start thinking about prioritization frameworks.

Prioritization Framework Flexibility

It's important to understand that selecting a prioritization framework isn't a lifetime commitment.

You Can Switch Frameworks at Any Time

Unlike many technology-based decisions, there's no lock-in regarding these frameworks. If you try one out and it's not a good fit, you can dump it and move on to your next choice. Most frameworks are free, although some have tools, templates, and other aids available for sale.

Instead, the main switching cost is training participants on the new terminology and model of any new framework and explaining to stakeholders that the criteria and method used for prioritization have changed.

But Don't Switch Too Often

While there are plenty of good reasons to shop around and try different prioritization frameworks, introduce the methods sparingly.

Each prioritization framework has a learning curve, so you don't want to ask too much of participating stakeholders. Try to limit introducing new frameworks to situations when it adds value.

Each prioritization framework has a learning curve, so try to limit introducing new frameworks to situations when it **adds value**.

Regardless of the impetus for a switch, communicate that change to everyone it impacts and the rationale for the transition, especially if it's only for a specific product in the portfolio. Without [standardization in the product team](#), it sends mixed messages to the rest of the organization.

You Can Use Multiple Prioritization Frameworks

Relying on two or three different prioritization frameworks doesn't mean you're indecisive. Instead, it signals that your team is continually striving to identify the best path forward and isn't afraid to get a little creative in the process. Prioritization frameworks tend to use and weigh criteria differently. Incorporating [multiple prioritization frameworks](#) offers opportunities for everyone involved to see things from various perspectives.

There are also stakeholder preferences to consider. For example, some may only be willing to use asynchronous prioritization frameworks, while others may want a more interactive one. The decision may be due to time constraints or that they simply don't like competing for "air time" during an in-person or virtual meeting.

Keeping multiple prioritization frameworks in heavy rotation can keep things from getting stale and repetitive. Even when dealing with the same bucket of potential development items, a different prioritization framework can bring a breath of fresh air to the process. For larger teams managing multiple products or product lines, a multiple prioritization framework approach can create consistency while allowing individual product managers to select one based on the specifics of their product and the participating stakeholders. This keeps them from "going rogue" entirely while still allowing for some autonomy and independence.

Proven Prioritization Methodologies

There are hundreds of product prioritization frameworks worldwide. Here, we'll highlight some of the top models we've found helpful for product teams and organizations. When reviewing these frameworks, think about your organization and the products in your portfolio to see which ones make the most sense.

Frameworks for Customer-Centric Product Strategies

- The Kano Model
- Design Thinking
- Jobs To Be Done (JTBD)

Frameworks for Smaller Companies

- AARRR (Pirate Metrics Framework)

Frameworks for Larger Companies

- Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe)
- Feature-Drive Development (FDD)

Frameworks for Weighing Value Against Resource Levels

- RICE Scoring
- Value vs. Complexity
- Weighted Scoring
- MoSCoW Analysis

Frameworks for Weighing Value Against Resource Levels

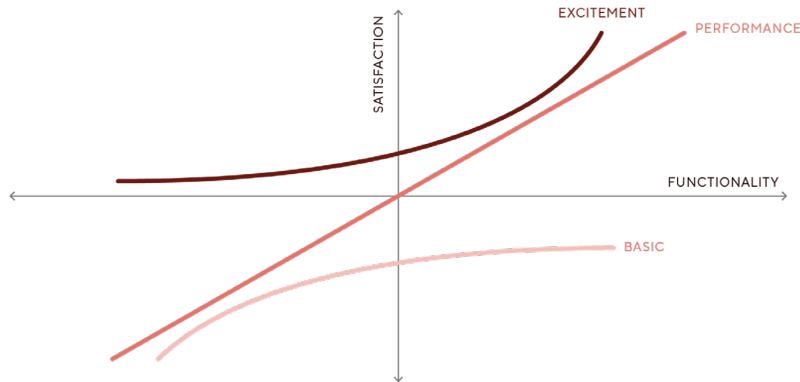
- Lean Software Development (LSD)
- Rapid Application Development (RAD)
- Crystal Agile Framework

Frameworks for Customer-Centric Product Strategies

If your organization takes its direction from a steady flow of [customer feedback](#), then one of these prioritization frameworks is a perfect match.

The Kano Model

Using the [Kano](#) model (pronounced “Kah-no”), a product team analyzes and ranks feature ideas according to a single consideration: how much each feature is likely to delight customers, measured against its cost to build. The model is one of the most widely used product prioritization frameworks and is especially popular among customer-centric companies.



Design Thinking

IDEO, the company often credited with creating the [design thinking](#) methodology, describes it as a “human-centered approach to building products.”

This methodology turns the standard product-development process on its head. Where most companies start by thinking about the product they hope to build, design thinking asks product teams to focus first on their users. Thus, the first step in the design thinking process is to empathize with users and understand their needs, wants, and challenges. Only then should the team begin generating ideas to solve those challenges.

Jobs To Be Done (JTBD)

[Jobs-to-be-done](#) (JTBD) helps reorient teams from thinking about the product to focusing on the person who might buy it. JTBD asks the product team to understand what customers are trying to accomplish when they “hire” a product to help them. If a new feature or enhancement isn’t helping the user get a job done, why build it?

Frameworks for Smaller Companies

AARRR (Pirate Metrics Framework)

AARRR, nicknamed the Pirate Metrics Framework thanks to its catchy acronym, helps startups tune out vanity metrics—such as social media activity—and instead prioritize their work around five key metrics affecting the company’s bottom line (Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Referral, Revenue).

The AARRR approach helps companies prioritize what matters most to users and the organization’s bottom line at every stage of the business lifecycle. The framework works particularly well for startups as these companies typically have a shorter runway to prove their product’s viability.



Frameworks for Larger Companies

The bigger the organization, the more complex things get when building consensus around a strategic path forward. These frameworks help prioritize things when there are a few too many cooks in the kitchen (or many kitchens!).

Feature-Driven Development (FDD)

Feature-driven development (FDD) is an Agile framework that organizes software development around making progress on “features.” In reality, these features look much more like traditional user stories. The FDD model’s top-down approach to decision-making means it’s best for large enterprises with clear personnel chains of command.

Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe)

The [Scaled Agile Framework](#) (SAFe) helps manage some common challenges large organizations face when practicing Agile development. It takes a top-down approach to decision-making focused on three critical aspects of development: team, program, and product portfolio.

Rather than a single methodology, SAFe acts as a broad knowledge base of proven best practices teams use to deliver successful software products. Key attributes include:

- Helping cross-functional teams **collaborate** more effectively
- Improving **transparency** among teams
- Aligning all aspects of a project to the **broader business goals**

Frameworks for Weighing Value Against Resource Levels

There are only so many hours in a day, so teams must make the most of them. These prioritization frameworks emphasize getting the biggest bang for your product development buck.

RICE Scoring

The [RICE scoring framework](#) takes a quantitative approach to prioritization by asking each participant to score items according to four factors: reach, impact, confidence, and effort.

When the total scores are added for all initiatives across those four criteria, each initiative will have a single score weighing its relative value to the product and the company.

Value vs. Complexity

The [value vs. complexity](#) approach enables teams to evaluate each initiative according to how much value it adds and the difficulty of its implementation. After scoring an initiative on those two criteria, the team then plots each on a quadrant before prioritizing accordingly on the roadmap.

The simple [product prioritization matrix](#) quickly identifies which initiatives deliver the highest value while requiring the least effort, highlighting the low-hanging fruit of the product roadmap. It also pinpoints which items to avoid since they're low-value/high-effort affairs. The stakeholders can further debate initiatives falling into the other two quadrants.

This framework is popular among those seeking an objective way to allocate time and finite development resources to initiatives with the most significant perceived or potential benefit.

Weighted Scoring

[Weighted scoring](#) prioritization (referred to as the [Benefit vs. Cost](#) approach) uses numerical scoring to rank initiatives according to their benefits and costs. It uses objective product prioritization techniques that factor in multiple layers of data.

The [ProductPlan Roadmap](#), pictured to the right, is one example of weighted scoring in action.

Using a scoring method to rank their strategic initiatives against benefit and cost categories, participants can have a more objective (and productive) discussion about what to include on the product roadmap. In the case of the Planning Board, scoring is on a one through five basis. A one means either low benefit or low cost, and a five means high benefit or high cost. The score determines what percentage of a category's weighting each item receives.

TITLE	VALUE	EFFORT	SCORE
Bootstrap Upgrade	5	5	120
API 2.0	4	5	100
Import Functionality	2	4	80
React Framework	1	3	80
Data Logging Module	2	5	60
Web App Overhaul	0	4	40

MoSCoW Analysis

The [MoSCoW prioritization framework](#) helps teams manage requirements and is commonly used to ensure stakeholders understand the importance of initiatives in a specific release. Initiatives get grouped into four categories, making up the acronym: M represents the “must-have” items; S is the

“should-haves;” C is the “could-haves” (or nice-to-have initiatives), and W represents the “will not have” items deemed low priority. This no-nonsense model forces decisions and trade-offs, accelerating the timeline so development can get to work.

Frameworks for Agile Software Teams

Agile software development organizations don't want process or documentation requirements to slow them down. However, they must ensure their intense pace is still taking products in the right direction. While most prioritization frameworks are compatible with Agile, these don't sacrifice strategic alignment while plugging in nicely to the overall development cycle.

Lean Software Development (LSD)

The [lean software development](#) (LSD) model aims to eliminate everything from the development queue that the product doesn't need. Sometimes dubbed the [Minimum Viable Product](#) (MVP) strategy, the goal is delivering a bare-bones product to users as quickly as possible, then applying their feedback to improve the product over time.

Rapid Application Development (RAD)

The [rapid application development](#) (RAD) model is an Agile prioritization framework focused on rapidly prototyping software products, frequently updating them based on feedback, and using [continuous delivery](#) to release newer versions to the market.

Using the RAD framework, it's a quick rinse-and-repeat cycle through the following four stages of product development:

PHASE 01

Requirements Planning

PHASE 02

User Design

PHASE 03

Rapid Construction

PHASE 04

Cutover (pushing the new version live to users)

The antithesis of waterfall development, RAD only works when there's a steady flow of prioritized initiatives ready for developers when they finish up their latest microburst of activity.

Crystal Agile Framework

Like the Agile development methodology itself, the [Crystal Agile framework](#) focuses on interactions among people and teams rather than processes and tools. The framework gives product teams the freedom to develop and improve their workflows.

This built-in flexibility makes the Crystal Agile framework popular within organizations striving to empower their teams to work however they deem most effective.

Strengths

- Allows teams to work the way they deem most effective
- Facilitates direct team communication, transparency, and accountability
- The adaptive approach lets teams respond well to changing requirements

Weaknesses

- Lack of pre-defined plans can lead to scope creep
- Lack of documentation can lead to confusion

This model works best among smaller, tightly integrated teams. However, the looseness of its approach increases the difficulty of communicating decisions, reasoning, and timelines beyond the core team. Product leaders sanctioning this approach must be vigilant to ensure stakeholders stay in the loop and that their requests and concerns get a fair judgment.

METHOD	TEAM SIZE	PROJECT SIZE
Crystal Clear	6 people or less	Small projects
Crystal Yellow	7-20 people	Small to medium projects
Crystal Orange	20-40 people	Medium projects
Crystal Red	40-80 people	Medium to large projects
Crystal Maroon	80-200 people	Large projects
Crystal Diamond & Sapphire	200+ people	Very large projects

BONUS

An Extra Special Framework Developed by the ProductPlan Team

Prioritization frameworks for product managers are so plentiful and vital that we decided to come up with one of our own! This holistic approach ensures every action taken maximizes the product's impact on its users and the company making it.

The IMPACT Method

IMPACT is as much a mindset as it is a framework. The method was designed to help keep ProductPlan's customers and businesses at the center of everything we do. IMPACT ensures energy and resources get expended on the most meaningful strategic work.

With this framework, the team can prioritize all items competing for space on the product roadmap by evaluating each against the following six criteria (which conveniently form the acronym IMPACT):

01 **Interesting**

Does the product address the things our customers care about? Can we tell a story of how the product creates positive change for them?

02 **Meaningful**

Are we moving the business toward measurably reaching its goals? Are we providing real value to our users?

03 **People**

Who is impacted by our product? Who uses it, sees the benefits, and pays for it?

04 **Actionable**

Are we coming up with ideas that can be implemented and realized? Do we have the resources, budget, and expertise to execute?

05 **Clear**

Do we truly understand what we're trying to do? Can it be concisely articulated so even a child could understand?

06 **Testable**

Can you try things out before making a significant commitment? Are there ways to experiment and measure success on an ongoing basis?

How Prioritization Frameworks Improve Product Roadmaps

Prioritization frameworks and product roadmaps work hand in hand to ensure teams are only working on initiatives that deliver value. Here's how the right framework can improve your team's product roadmaps.

BENEFIT 01

It Frees up Time and Creative Energy

Without a framework for identifying which initiatives offer the greatest strategic advantages, your team will spend additional time and energy cycling through their backlogs. A prioritization framework standardizes these steps.

For example, when using the Weighted Scoring model, there are specific steps to evaluate each initiative's value against its cost. When completed for all competing ideas, the debates and discussions end. No more need to continue arguing, reconsidering, or relitigating the list. Does this mean your team's product roadmaps will only have winning feature ideas? Of course not. There's no guarantee of success, but because the prioritization framework standardizes and shortens the decision-making process, there's more time to develop additional potentially great ideas.

BENEFIT 02

It Prevents Ad Hoc Requests From Claiming Unearned Spots on the Product Roadmap

Using a prioritization framework helps your team deal more effectively with the never-ending stream of requests that can derail progress. All stakeholders must understand the process and criteria for this tactic to work.

Without fixed stages or guidelines during the development process, there are too many opportunities for overeager sales reps or executives. Flexibility and improvisation can quickly lead to chaotic free-for-alls.

With a prioritization framework and supporting process, there's no need to negotiate these requests. It also prevents the development team from getting distracted. With this in place, they know they'll only be interrupted by something urgent when it truly is an emergency.

BENEFIT 03

It Generates More Strategically Viable Ideas

While implementing a prioritization framework, everyone asks themselves, "How does this initiative measure up against our prioritization criteria?"

This keeps ideas that might seem good on their own from gaining traction and taking up airtime. The right framework improves roadmaps by reducing the number of items people propose that won't meet the framework's success criteria.

Suppose you're using the IMPACT approach, for example. In that case, coworkers might quickly ask themselves if their new feature suggestion will prove Interesting and Meaningful. If it doesn't, it's out of consideration before it even makes it to the backlog.

Real-World Examples

All this talk of optimized processes, alignment, agreement, and collaboration sounds great. Yet, how can it work at your organization? Whether it's the target market, the corporate culture, or the product's majority, it's easy to poke holes in any prioritization framework before even giving it a try.

Prioritization framework adopters follow in the footsteps of many other organizations. Luckily, some of them have shared their own tales of success. Here are two examples from very different industries and applications.

SERVPRO

Using a Roadmap App To Standardize the Prioritization Process Across Franchises

One real-world example is [Servpro](#), a nationwide franchiser of water and fire cleanup companies.

Everyone now knows why their item didn't get to the top. So we put the onus on them to talk through things as a group and decide what makes the top.

JASON WIX, DIRECTOR OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT, SERVPRO

Because the company had grown so rapidly to more than 450 corporate employees, they found various departments using their own processes to define high-priority items that received attention, resources, and budget.

So the company's Director of Program Management, Jason Wix, developed a standard process for any team to request development work. Wix then used ProductPlan's Planning Board feature as its roadmap prioritization software and a custom version of the Weighted Scoring model to evaluate all requests according to the same criteria.

Because this app makes it easy to share a roadmap with anyone online via a link, Wix could make his team's strategic plans and priorities transparent to all departments across the company. As he explains, the results were transformational for Servpro's operations: "Everyone now knows why their item didn't get to the top. So we put the onus on them to talk through things as a group and decide what makes the top."

LIONBRIDGE

Using Prioritization Within ProductPlan's Roadmap Platform

[Lionbridge](#) is a leading language localization service, translating content into more than 350 languages for clients worldwide—using a combination of in-house linguistics experts and highly sophisticated machine-learning applications.

But Chris Dudak, Senior Manager of Product Management, explains that the demand to update the product continually became difficult. The key challenge was dealing with large volumes of competing priorities from various stakeholders.

With ProductPlan, our product management team is spending less time talking about what we're doing and more time actually doing it.

CHRIS DUDAK, SENIOR MANAGER OF PRODUCT MANAGEMENT, LIONBRIDGE

Chris and his product team found it challenging without a standard framework to evaluate those requests. The challenge came from knowing which ones should receive the development team's limited resources. They also had trouble explaining their rationale behind the decisions to frustrated stakeholders.

Leveraging ProductPlan's Planning Board—and the Weighted Scoring Framework

They started using ProductPlan's roadmap platform—and running competing feature requests through the Planning Board. The board uses the weighted scoring approach to product prioritization. Now, Chris's team could create objective scores for each agenda item according to a consistent set of criteria. His team can evaluate the potential strategic value and ability to delight customers. They can assess against its estimated development effort and operational costs.

The solution has positively affected the Lionbridge product team's workflows and efficiency. Chris notes that the team now has a framework to quickly identify the most strategically viable projects. And they have a place for those items on the roadmap. Moreover, they share the team's strategic thinking with everyone in the company. This transparency allows them to free up the product team's time and creative energy.

As Chris explains, "With ProductPlan, our product management team is spending less time talking about what we're doing and more time actually doing it."

It All Comes Down to Impact

Prioritization frameworks present an excellent opportunity to streamline product roadmapping. They allow you to evaluate every potential idea to analyze the product and how it will impact the company and product strategy.

By limiting implementation to what matters most, teams can carefully vet initiatives. They can evaluate the initiatives by establishing key criteria, such as the warrant for the expenditure of time, money, and resources.

Whatever type of product you build for whatever industry you're in, the high-level goals stay the same. You need to solve real problems for the market and improve people's jobs or lives in some way. Moreover, your product should align with your company's product vision allowing your company to succeed and grow. That impact matters much more than any particular list of features or enhancements.





About ProductPlan

ProductPlan makes it easy for teams of all sizes to build beautiful roadmaps. Thousands of product managers worldwide—including teams from Virgin Atlantic, Microsoft, and G2—trust ProductPlan to help them visualize and share their strategies across their entire organization. With our intuitive features, product managers spend less time building roadmaps and more time shipping products.

[Start Your Free Trial](#)