

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest

Prioritizing in an agile team¹

Henny Portman

Introduction

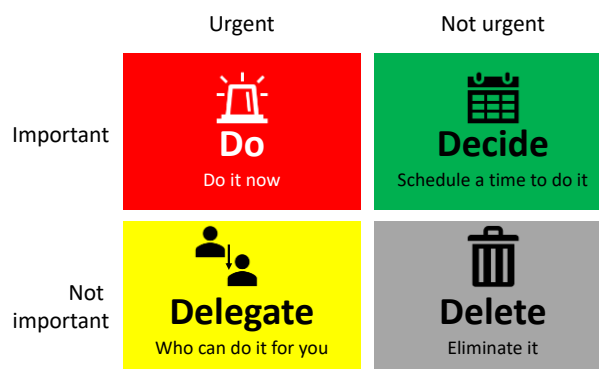
How to prioritize work in an agile team? The time is thankfully past when the person with the loudest voice has the upper hand. However, the amount of work to be done is often more than a team can handle in a time period. That means making choices and setting priorities. In this blog, a number of prioritization techniques are reviewed, such as the Eisenhower matrix, MoSCoW (KYIV), Kano and WSJF.

Eisenhower matrix

A famous quote from General Dwight D. Eisenhower is "*Plans are nothing, planning is everything.*" During planning you discuss what you want to achieve as a minimum. In order to be able to set priorities quickly and decisively, he devised a handy and simple tool. In the Eisenhower matrix, two questions are compared.

- Is it important?
- Is it urgent?

Based on these two questions you can then decide whether to take it up immediately, carry it out later, delegate it or not carry it out. Problem with this is that if there are too many important and urgent things, you still don't know what to pick up first. So how then to prioritize in an agile team?



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MoSCoW

A common method of prioritizing requirements or backlog items is the MoSCoW method. It is an abbreviation, whose letters stand for:

- **M** Must have: non-negotiable. Without it, the project has no right to exist.
- **S** Should have: important but not indispensable. Without this, the end product may still provide value. A workaround may be needed.
- **C** Could have: desirable, but not as important as the should have. Are only executed if there is sufficient time and budget.
- **W** Won't have: not needed at this time. Has no business value right now (maybe in of the next sprints).

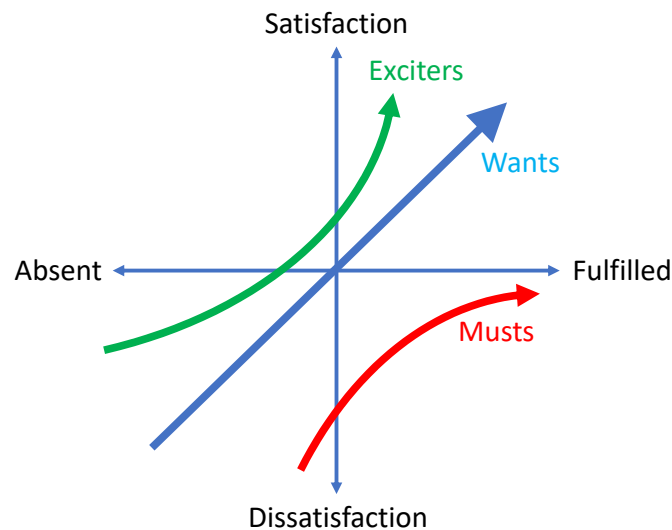
With the MoSCoW method, the same problem applies as with the Eisenhower matrix. How do you deal with too many must have? AgilePM uses the following rule of thumb: when planning, a maximum of 60% must have, 20% should have and 20% could have is used to ensure that at least all must have are realized. In case of setbacks, the won't have are sacrificed first, followed by the could have.

On LinkedIn I came across a post to rebrand MoSCoW and change it to KYIV (K keep it in, Y you ought to, I if you can, V vanished).

Kano

The Kano matrix is based on the realization of products or features that impress users. Kano is suitable for the product development process, as it offers to divide the MVP or product's features into

- those that users expect from the product
- those that users do not care about
- those that bring joy to users



WSJF

Weighted Shortest Job First (WSJF) is a prioritization method developed by Don Reinertsen and best known for its use within SAFe. WSJF assumes not the value that a backlog item provides but the cost of not having it. The goal is to minimize the cost of delay across all backlog items.

An example: you have two items where item A takes 3 days to realize and each day you don't have the item costs €1000. A second item B takes 1 day to complete and also this item costs you €1000 every day you don't have it. It is then wiser to start with item B.

Example 2: you have 2 items C and D. The lead time of both items is equal. The cost of delay is for item C €3000 and for item D €1000. So, in this example it is better to start with item C. However, the world is not that simple. The backlog contains items with different lead times and different delay costs. You can calculate WSJF by dividing the cost of delay per item by the lead time. The item with the highest WSJF gets the highest priority.

No exact values

It is often impossible to determine the absolute values of the costs of delay and lead time. Prioritization is about determining the order, it is not about the exact values. It is possible to calculate the WSJF of your backlog based on relative values (e.g., 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, ...) for cost of delay and for lead time.

Cost of delay is composed of the following three components:

- User value
- Time-criticality
- Risk reduction or opportunity enablement

For all three components, determine the relative value for each backlog item.

In the backlog, choose the item with the smallest user value and relate all other backlog items to this or in other words 'this backlog item provides three times as much value as the item with the smallest value'. Repeat this process for the time criticality and risk reduction items.

Then determine the relative value of lead time in the same way. Choose the backlog item with the shortest lead time and relate all other items to it.

Per backlog item you can then calculate the relative value of the cost of delay by adding up the relative values of the three items.

For each backlog item, the WSJF can now be determined by dividing the relative value of the cost of delay by the relative value of the lead time. The item with the highest WSJF has the highest priority.

Conclusion

The Eisenhower matrix, the MoSCoW and Kano model do not provide a fully prioritized list of items. In addition, there is a possibility that you will get started with only a few major items. Where there is a risk that the team ends up delivering nothing in the sprint. WSJF is not an exact science, but it does give you an objectively prioritized list for prioritizing in an agile team.

Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series

This article is part of a series of articles called *Sensemaking in the Agile Forest*. This series² consists of the following parts:

- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue I, January.](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What is Scrum? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article 2, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue II, February](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Is agile always better? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue III, March](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The ideal Product Owner, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. IX, Issue IV, April](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The Ideal Scrum Master, Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue V, May](#)

² This series is based on a number of short blogs I made for Forsa Advies, a project management training organization in the Netherlands (<https://www.forsa-advies.nl>).

- [Portman, H. \(2022\). Is an agile team always autonomous? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VI, June](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). What do iterative and incremental mean in Agile? Sensemaking in the Agile Forest series, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VII, July](#)
- [Portman, H. \(2022\). The Minimum Viable Product \(MVP\) unraveled; Sensemaking in the Agile Forest, series article, PM World Journal, Vol. XI, Issue VIII, August](#)
- Prioritizing in an agile team (MoSCoW, WSJF)
- Multitasking task switching or monotasking
- Being predictable as an agile team (story points, velocity, t-shirt sizing, flying fingers)
- Self-managing or self-organizing agile teams
- Slicing user stories
- Agile management products (burn-down and burn-up charts)
- Agile user testing (cohorts, A/B testing)
- The Kanban board (WIP-limit, cumulative flow diagram)
- Culture makes or breaks your agile transformation
- Getting started as an agile team (a pilot)
- The evolution of agile frameworks
- ?

Please let me know if you would like to add specific agile topics to this series.

About the Author



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Henny Portman, owner of Portman PM[O] Consultancy and was partner of HWP Consulting, has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, program, and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches, and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional (PM(O)) communities.

Henny Portman is/was accredited in a variety of qualifications, including P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM and AgileSHIFT trainer and an SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant (PMO Global Alliance). On behalf of IPMA, he assesses mega and large projects for the IPMA Project Excellence Award. In addition to this, he is an international speaker, author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field, and an active blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com/).

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