MoSCoW

MoSCoW is a prioritisation scheme. Its name is formed from the initial letters of its four prioritisation categories, ordered from highest to lowest priority: "Must have", "Should have", "Could have" and "Won't have this time".

MoSCoW is a simple, memorable and quick technique for prioritising. It can be used for items such as requirements, tasks and tests. It helps the team identify and focus on the most important and valuable things first. It can help select the initial increment by including the genuine "Must Have" requirements. These should be the only requirements that must be completed before we could deploy a new live release of the product.

The meaning of the four priority categories in MoSCoW is as follows:

- "Must have" – we cannot release the product without this, because without it the product would be unusable, valueless or would do more harm than good (for example, it would not be safe or legal, or would cause significant reputational damage to the organisation).

- "Should have" – there is very significant value in these requirements and we really want to add them to the next release of the product but, if needs must, we could release the product without them.

- "Could have" – there is real value in these requirements, but we could wait for them to be implemented in a later release.

- "Won't have this time" – while there may be some merit in these requirements we are prepared not to include them in the release being developed.

Implementation

Prerequisites

- Share and agree the definitions of the MoSCoW prioritisation levels with the business.

- Agree the decision-making processes, including the decision-making authorities, their levels of empowerment and escalation routes for any disputes about priorities.

Doing the MoSCoW prioritisation

1. After identifying a requirement, we assign a priority to it using the agreed processes as soon as possible.

2. When there are changing circumstances, or new information comes to light, we may need to revisit the priorities and revise as necessary.

Outcome

Function

Benefit

Who

Scaling Factors

Difficulty

Potential pitfalls

- It's easy to over-load the "Must have" section, stuffing it with requirements and therefore not actually helping the team prioritise at all. A rule of thumb to help avoid this is that "Must have" requirements should account for no more than 60% of the total effort.

- For convenience "Won't have this time" is often shorted to just "Won't", which in turn can cause it to be interpreted as a genuine "Won't", i.e. 'ruled permanently out of scope' or 'rejected as a genuinely bad idea that we definitely should not implement'. To avoid this, it can be useful to add a fifth category of "Rejected".

- MoSCoW prioritisation only makes sense within the context of a specified timeframe or product release. A common pitfall involves the failure to specify the timeframe to which the specified priority applies.

If you want to learn more, consider reading:

DSDM - Business Focused Development by the DSDM Consortium edited by Jennifer Stapleton

DSDM Atern Handbook v2, Dynamic Systems Development Consortium