MoSCoW Prioritisation

Every project has more wishes than time, money or people. MoSCoW Prioritisation is a simple way to sort those wishes so that everyone agrees on what matters most. Dai Clegg developed it in 1994, and it later became a central technique of DSDM, an agile project framework now maintained by the Agile Business Consortium. The name comes from four groups: Must have, Should have, Could have and Won't have this time, and two small o's were added so that the word is easy to say. Teams use it to protect the deadline, manage expectations and agree calmly on what to drop when time runs short.

1. Must Have

Must Haves are the requirements that the project guarantees to deliver. DSDM calls them the Minimum Usable Subset: without them, the result would not work, would not be legal or would not be safe. A simple test helps: what happens if this item is not delivered? If the honest answer is that there is no point in delivering anything at all, it is a Must. DSDM advises keeping Musts to no more than about sixty percent of the effort, so that the team can deliver them with confidence.

Example: A family packs for a holiday abroad and applies the Must Have test: what happens if we forget the passports? There is no trip at all, so passports and tickets are Musts.

At work: Hazem, a project manager, is launching a new online shop in eight weeks, and the client says that everything is a must. Hazem applies the Must Have test to online payment: what happens if customers cannot pay? The shop could not sell anything, so secure payment is a Must.

2. Should Have

Should Haves are important, but not vital. If one is missing, the result still works, even if things are harder for a while. Sometimes there is a workaround, such as a manual step or a temporary solution. The team plans to deliver Should Haves and works hard to do so. However, if time runs short, a Should can wait without making the whole delivery fail.

Example: The family applies the Should Have rule to the phone charger: it matters, but is there a workaround? Yes, a charger can be bought at the airport, so it is a Should.

At work: Hazem looks at order tracking. He applies the Should Have rule: is there a workaround if it comes late? Customers can receive order updates by email for a few weeks, so tracking is a Should.

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3. Could Have

Could Haves are wanted or desirable, but less important. Leaving one out has a smaller impact than leaving out a Should. They are the team's safety margin, delivered only when time and budget allow. DSDM suggests keeping about twenty percent of the effort for Could Haves, so that there is room to absorb surprises. When a problem appears, Could Haves are the first items to be dropped.

Example: The family applies the Could Have rule to a second pair of smart shoes: nice, but only if there is space left. The suitcase is full, so the shoes stay at home, and nobody minds.

At work: Hazem applies the Could Have rule to an animated welcome banner: it will be built only if time allows. In week six, a payment problem needs extra work. The banner is dropped, and the deadline is safe.

4. Won't Have This Time

Won't Haves are items that the team agrees not to deliver in this timeframe. The key words here are this time: the idea is not rejected forever, only moved out of the current plan. Writing these items down clearly avoids hidden expectations. It also stops them from quietly slipping back into the work. Later, a Won't Have can become a Must or a Should in a new phase.

Example: The family applies the Won't Have rule to the big camera: phones will do for this short trip. The camera is saved for a longer trip next year.

At work: Hazem and the client apply the Won't Have rule to a mobile app: not in this launch. They write it into the plan for phase two, so the client knows that it is coming later and is not forgotten.

Conclusion

In summary, MoSCoW sorts every requirement into four groups: Must have, Should have, Could have and Won't have this time. The Musts form the minimum that the project guarantees, while the Shoulds and Coulds give the team room to adapt. Clear Won't Haves manage expectations and keep the scope under control. The groups work best when the team and the stakeholders agree on them together and review them as the work goes on. When everything is a priority, nothing is, so MoSCoW turns a long wish list into clear choices.

Sources

- Agile Business Consortium: What is MoSCoW Prioritization? – https://www.agilebusiness.org/resource/what-is-moscow-prioritization/
- Clegg, D. and Barker, R. (1994). CASE Method Fast-Track: A RAD Approach. Addison-Wesley (the origin of MoSCoW).
- Wikipedia: MoSCoW method – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MoSCoW_method
- DSDM is a framework of the Agile Business Consortium; the explanations here are in our own words.

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