

# IT PROJECT PRIORITIZATION: HOW TO DECIDE WHAT TO WORK ON AND IN WHAT ORDER



When it comes to IT projects, there is usually a long list of to-do items, all of which seem pressing and considered urgent by stakeholders. Without the time or resources to tackle them all at once, it becomes important to prioritize tasks. Effective prioritization can help IT teams with time management, enable all members to work more efficiently, and help to ensure that your team is tackling the most critical projects first.

That said, prioritizing IT tasks is not an easy process. With many different parties involved, all of which seem to have differing opinions about how projects should be handled, it can be frustrating and inefficient to try to prioritize projects properly. However, implementing some strategies to help with project prioritization and creating a prioritization system can make this task more efficient and effective.

## Strategies for Prioritizing Projects

A few things that your organization should consider implementing as part of its [prioritization system](#) include:

## **Evaluating Projects with Strategic Level Planning in Mind**

Before prioritizing, it's important to spend some time gathering all of the information that your team needs to be able to order projects effectively. One part of that information gathering should involve working with the leadership team and gaining a thorough understanding of the business's overall vision, the direction the company is planning to go, and the timeline for any major shifts. To better have an understanding of these issues, consider having all project managers involved in strategic-level planning. By better understanding and keeping the company's strategic-level planning in mind, the IT team will be better positioned to prioritize projects properly.

## **Identifying What Factors are Motivating Each Project**

Similarly, as part of information gathering, it's helpful to understand what factors are motivating each project. For example, is a project focused on gaining a competitive advantage, financial benefit, process improvement, legal or tax regulations, improving quality, reducing risks, or growing the business? Understanding what factors are motivating each project is important information that your team needs to have before ordering projects.

## **Identifying any Issues that Might Impact Project Success or Completion**

Another component that it's crucial to think through is anything that could potentially impact project completion. For example, do you have a project that can only be finished once another team completes a task? Or one that is dependent on factors that are outside of the business's control? If so, it's important to identify those issues so that you can keep them in mind when evaluating which projects to take on first.

## **Creating a Criteria-Based Matrix**

Once you've gathered the necessary information, create an objective system for weighing and evaluating projects. Creating a criteria-based matrix is an effective way to do this and to build a model that can be used repeatedly. Doing so will enable your team to rate each project based on established criteria, which will provide an objective, data-driven system for prioritizing tasks.

## **Sharing Prioritization List with the Management and Leadership Team**

Once you've created a list that prioritizes projects, it's important to share the list with management and the leadership team before beginning work. In addition to sharing this list, it's helpful to also review the matrix with stakeholders so there's transparency about how projects were ranked. Doing this ensures that all parties are on the same page about what projects will be given priority and helps to establish clear expectations. Further, it offers another opportunity for feedback and input before the established plan is put into action.

## **Effectively Creating and Using a Criteria-Based Matrix to Prioritize Projects**

While information gathering and sharing is an essential part of the process, creating and utilizing a criteria-based matrix is perhaps the most important way to ensure that prioritization is done

strategically, objectively, and effectively. To develop the matrix, it's necessary to involve all IT stakeholders.

With these stakeholders at the table, the first step is to establish the criteria to use to judge projects. These criteria will be specific to each organization and should be specifically catered to your organization's priorities and needs. However, when crafting these criteria, it's important to ensure that they are factors that can be measured objectively and easily. Examples of common criteria used are:

- Competitive advantage
- Customer satisfaction
- Ease of Implementing
- Potential Revenue

Once criteria are developed, allocate a weight to each criteria on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being least important and 5 being most important.

Once the criteria are established and weighted, you can use the matrix to evaluate specific projects. Using a similar 1 to 5 scale, rate each project based on the impact that it will have on each criterion identified. For example, a rating of 1 would indicate that a project will have the least positive impact on a particular criterion; whereas, a rating of 5 would mean the project will have the most positive impact on the established criterion.

After rating each project based on its impact on each criterion identified, simply multiply the rating and weight to get a score for each criterion. Next, add up the scores for each project to determine the order in which projects should be addressed.

For more details about how to develop and utilize a criteria-based matrix, visit this [tutorial](#).

## Tips for Easy and Effective Implementation of Prioritization Strategies

Even with good strategies and systems in place, the process of prioritizing IT tasks can be frustrating and challenging. After all, it inherently involves lots of different individuals, many of whom have different priorities and opinions about how projects should be addressed. To help ease this burden and to help to make planning more productive, keep these [tips](#) in mind:

- **Let data drive the process.** When you sit down with a team to prioritize projects, make sure that you've brought all necessary information and data with you. Using data to help frame issues and the impact that projects will have can reduce the extent to which opinions and "gut feelings" drive or are distractions during the process.
- **Be consistent about the criteria used.** Another way to reduce the impact of individual opinions and desires is to be consistent about the criteria used in the planning matrix. This ensures that organizational priorities are at the center of the process, as opposed to departmental desires or an individual's unsubstantiated opinion of how projects should be tackled.
- **Unify around goals.** Another way to ensure that the prioritization process is focused on the right issues is to ensure that all parties involved agree upon and are unified around the same organizational goals. Unifying around the same top-level goals before beginning the task of prioritization will help to make the process more focused and effective.
- **Prioritize with a specific time frame in mind.** When working with teams to prioritize projects,

it's helpful to specify a time frame. For example, it's easier for a department or team member to understand that a project will not be addressed "this month" or "this quarter" as opposed to hearing that it's not being addressed. This small shift can have a big impact on the prioritization process and how the prioritized list is received.

Prioritizing IT projects is not easy or quick, but it's an important step towards ensuring that IT teams are successful. Taking the time to go through this process helps to ensure the team has the necessary information to prioritize tasks and that the team is taking on the most important projects first. Further, it helps establish organization-wide communication, clear expectations, and transparency about how projects are ranked. If your organization does not have a system for prioritizing projects, start working with IT stakeholders and the leadership team as soon as possible to create one that can be used consistently to prioritize projects.