

A Guide to Using an Incident Priority Matrix



Meta Description: Learn to effectively use an incident priority matrix for efficient incident resolution. Prioritize based on severity, impact, and more.

IT leaders often find themselves under pressure to support business outcomes while also trying to manage help requests. An incident priority matrix makes the incident management process much more seamless. It helps companies handle priority incidents within reasonable resolution times while ensuring other concerns are met.

What Is an Incident Priority Matrix?

Customer service representatives deal with a constant flow of tickets through the help desk. Organizations need a way to determine incident urgency to guide which issues get handled more quickly. An incident priority matrix helps businesses define the importance of incidents and the speed at which teams must act to resolve a problem.

By visualizing priority incidents, a matrix helps companies allocate available resources. High-priority issues are quickly identified, allowing for prompt action. Tasks placed at a lower priority are dealt with at a slower pace within acceptable resolution times.

The Importance of Prioritizing Incidents

Businesses typically only have so many resources available to allot to any given task. They need to make the best use of personnel, time, money, and technology. That means deciding what to consider major incidents that need immediate attention.

A priority incident matrix makes the incident management process smoother. If an outage has a serious impact on business functions or could lead to a loss of revenue, it should move to the top of the list. It's easier to move those items higher in priority using an incident management matrix.

Prioritization helps companies locate and deal with incidents as a function of time to reduce the harm to their operations, assets, reputation, and assets. It lowers the potential of security damage caused by a bad actor managing to exploit vulnerabilities caused by critical incidents.

Organizations can mobilize response teams and gather resources more quickly. That increases the ability of companies to contain incidents before they progress and cause more damage.

Many industries follow regulatory requirements dictating the management and reporting of major incidents. Using an incident priority matrix positions organizations to address incidents with compliance implications. They avoid dealing with fallout that could lead to legal and regulatory consequences.

Key Components of an Incident Priority Matrix

Two terms typically used when calculating an incident's priority are impact and urgency. Impact measures how an incident affects day-to-day functioning and the damage caused. For example, what are the effects of a CRM crashing while customer service agents try to take handle service requests? You assess the impact on users and the effect it has on their ability to function in a business capacity.

Urgency shows how quickly an organization should move to find a resolution. How critical is it to get that CRM up and running? Urgency also factors the resources and the time it would take to resolve the incident.

Levels of Priority

Incident priority levels represent categories that rank and differentiate incidents based on their impact, urgency, and importance. Priority levels tell incident response teams how to allocate resources, figure out responses as a function of time, and determine which actions to take.

The numbering and labeling of priority levels varies. They typically follow a structure that maps out several distinct groups for incident categorization. Below are some examples of standard priority labels.

- **Critical.** Contains incidents with the most significant impact that require immediate attention. These incidents have the potential to cause severe operational damage and affect a company's reputation and employees' safety.
- **High priority.** Contains incidents that could significantly impact operations and require prompt attention.
- **Medium priority.** These incidents can moderately impact business functions. The disruptions could lead to business losses but don't require an immediate response.
- **Low priority.** These incidents have a minimal impact on operations. They can be managed less urgently and do not require an immediate response but still need to be addressed in a reasonable timeframe before they qualify for incident escalations.

Levels of Impact

These categorizations refer to the degree of consequences an incident might cause an organization. For example, a blown transformer that shuts down power would have a bigger impact than a [crashed website](#), even though both might rank high in priority. Priority levels help companies assess an incident's overall severity and determine the best course of action. Below are some examples of typical levels of priority.

- **Low impact.** Impacts here can cause minor consequences with minimal effects on operations. They also are unlikely to cause substantial harm and can be managed without an immediate response.
- **Medium impact.** These incidents can lead to moderate operational disruption, potential financial losses, and even some reputational damage.
- **High impact.** High-impact incidents severely disrupt user functions and business operations. They may also cause substantial financial losses, lead to data breaches, or cause significant reputational damage. These incidents require immediate attention and a comprehensive response to avoid escalation.
- **Critical impact.** Impacts here can cause a crucial business service to become unavailable, directly hurting a company's brand. These incidents can also have significant security impacts like ransomware that leads to the hijacking of company systems. Critical impact incidents are all-hands-on-deck moments.

Levels of Urgency

Urgency levels refer to the need to resolve an incident quickly. Below are examples of common levels of urgency.

- **Low urgency.** These incidents aren't considered time-sensitive. Immediate action isn't needed.
- **Medium urgency.** These incidents should receive a timely response, not an immediate one. They can moderately impact business functions.
- **High urgency.** These incidents require an immediate response. They can escalate quickly and lead to significant business harm if not dealt with promptly.

How To Use the Incident Priority Matrix

The following steps can help organizations make the best use of an incident priority matrix.

Assess Incident Severity and Impact

Define what type of incidents would fall under low-, medium-, and high-impact levels for your company. Look at each incident and its potential to cause operational disruption. Will critical functions grind to a halt, keep one department from getting their work done, or impact a few users sporadically? How much revenue loss would your business endure if the situation wasn't handled immediately?

Asking questions like these will help you categorize each incident. Businesses should establish priority zones showing the likelihood of an incident coming to pass. Defining the relative urgency of incidents in this way helps you come up with responses, related actions, and [incident communication strategies](#).

Map Incidents to Priority Levels

Start assigning incidents to priority levels based on the information you discover. Your classes should correspond to the levels you established regarding impact and urgency. From there, start mapping out response plans for every priority level. They should guide the way teams approach impact resolution.

Develop escalation rules for incidents mapped to lower levels that might cause them to rise to a higher level. That can impact the resolution times deemed acceptable by the organization. Something that may only impact a few users initially can gradually expand to the point where it affects a company's ability to provide reliable service.

Allocation of Resources and Response Times

Think through how you can strategically distribute manpower and time. You also need to budget enough to provide an appropriate incident response. Define how many resources are necessary to mitigate issues at different incident priority levels. Questions you should answer during this planning stage include:

- Which personnel need to be involved?
- What skills are needed to mitigate an incident?
- Which tools are available?
- How will team members communicate about incident resolution?
- Is legal support necessary?

Complex issues may require more resources, even at a lower priority level. Critical incidents may also require only a few people with specific skills to handle a situation. Consider all these scenarios when determining resolution times and who should be on the response team.

Benefits of an Incident Priority Matrix

Many organizations use an incident management matrix to streamline their entire service management process. Having a structured framework makes it easier to evaluate and figure out where incidents rank in importance. It also gives provides valuable information when determining how to respond to an incident.

Efficient Resource Allocation

An incident priority matrix provides clear guidelines on which resources to deploy when responding to an incident. That keeps organizations from wasting money on lower-priority incidents or increasing security damage because of an inadequate response.

Improved Incident Response Times

Organizational users can use an incident priority matrix to identify high-priority or critical incidents quickly. They also make it easier to determine incident urgency and incident impact. That can reduce the potential damage from the fallout.

Enhanced Incident Management and Communication

Information exchanges during incident responses are more straightforward when everyone has a common framework. Everyone ends up speaking the same language regarding incident severity and allocating resources. Managers have what they need to make informed decisions quickly based on an incident's priority level. The matrix also defines escalation rules, procedures to follow, and [notification](#) protocols for incident escalations.

Integrate Incident Priority Matrix With Incident Communication Tools

Statuspal makes it easier for businesses to establish organized communication during an incident response. See how much your company can benefit from our platform by [signing up for a free trial](#).