Issue Prioritization Matrix

A simple 2×2 grid for deciding what to do first. You score each task or issue on two axes, usually how much impact it has and how much effort it takes, and place it in one of four boxes. The grid instantly separates 'quick wins' from 'time sinks', so a long, overwhelming list becomes a clear order of action.

Best for: Prioritisation · Roadmaps & backlogs · Team planning · Deciding what to drop

01 — AT A GLANCE

Plot each item on two axes, impact (high or low) and effort (low or high), and read off which quadrant it lands in.

Vertical: impact. Horizontal: effort. Do the high-impact, low-effort wins first.

	Low effort	High effort
High impact	**Quick Wins** Do now	**Big Bets** Plan & resource
Low impact	**Fill-Ins** Maybe, spare time	**Time Sinks** Avoid or drop

02 — THE CORE COMPONENTS

Four quadrants, one decision each.

Quick Wins (high impact, low effort)	Do these first. Big payoff for little work, the obvious place to start and build momentum.
Big Bets (high impact, high effort)	Worth doing, but plan and resource them properly. These are projects, not quick tasks.
Fill-Ins (low impact, low effort)	Nice-to-haves. Do them in spare time or batch them, but never before the wins and bets.
Time Sinks (low impact, high effort)	Avoid or drop. Lots of work for little return, the trap that quietly eats your week.

Make 'impact' honest

> The matrix is only as good as your scoring. Define what 'impact' means up front (revenue? users? risk reduced?) and be honest about effort. Many 'big bets' turn out to be time sinks in disguise once the effort is scored truthfully.

03 — WHEN TO USE IT & WHEN NOT TO

This framework isn't right for every situation. Used at the wrong moment, it can point you in the wrong direction.

✓ USE IT WHEN…	✗ DON'T USE WHEN…
• A long backlog or to-do list to sequence • Aligning a team on what to do first • Quick, visual prioritisation without heavy modelling • Deciding what to deprioritise or cut	• When impact or effort can't be reasonably estimated • Many interdependent tasks (order is forced, not free) • High-stakes calls needing a richer, weighted model • When 'impact' isn't honestly or consistently defined

04 — IN ACTION

The Backlog — Sequencing 30 Competing Ideas

A product team has 30 backlog items and everyone's pet feature feels urgent. Instead of arguing, they score each item on impact and effort and drop it into the matrix.

How the framework was applied:

Step 1	**Define the axes —** 'Impact' = effect on activation and revenue; 'effort' = engineering weeks. Agreed up front.
Step 2	**Score each item —** Every backlog item gets a quick high/low on both axes.
Step 3	**Place them —** A one-click signup fix lands in Quick Wins; a full redesign in Big Bets; a niche setting in Fill-Ins; a legacy migration in Time Sinks.
Step 4	**Sequence the work —** Ship the quick wins this sprint, schedule the big bet with proper resourcing, park the fill-ins, drop the time sink.
Step 5	**Result —** A 30-item argument becomes a clear, agreed order in under an hour.

The numbers at a glance

Backlog	Quick wins	Time sinks	Decision
30	**First**	**Dropped**	**<1 hr**
items	this sprint	low impact	not a debate

Why the grid ended the argument

Everyone's feature felt urgent until impact and effort were scored side by side. The matrix made the trade-offs visible, so the team shipped the high-leverage wins first and dropped a 'must-have' that was really a time sink.

05 — KEEP IN MIND

Even experienced teams slip up here. Keep these in mind to keep your analysis honest and useful.

1. Vague or shifting definitions of 'impact'.
2. Underestimating effort, so time sinks masquerade as big bets.
3. Treating the matrix as final when tasks depend on each other.
4. Letting the loudest voice score the items.
5. Filling quadrants once and never revisiting as things change.