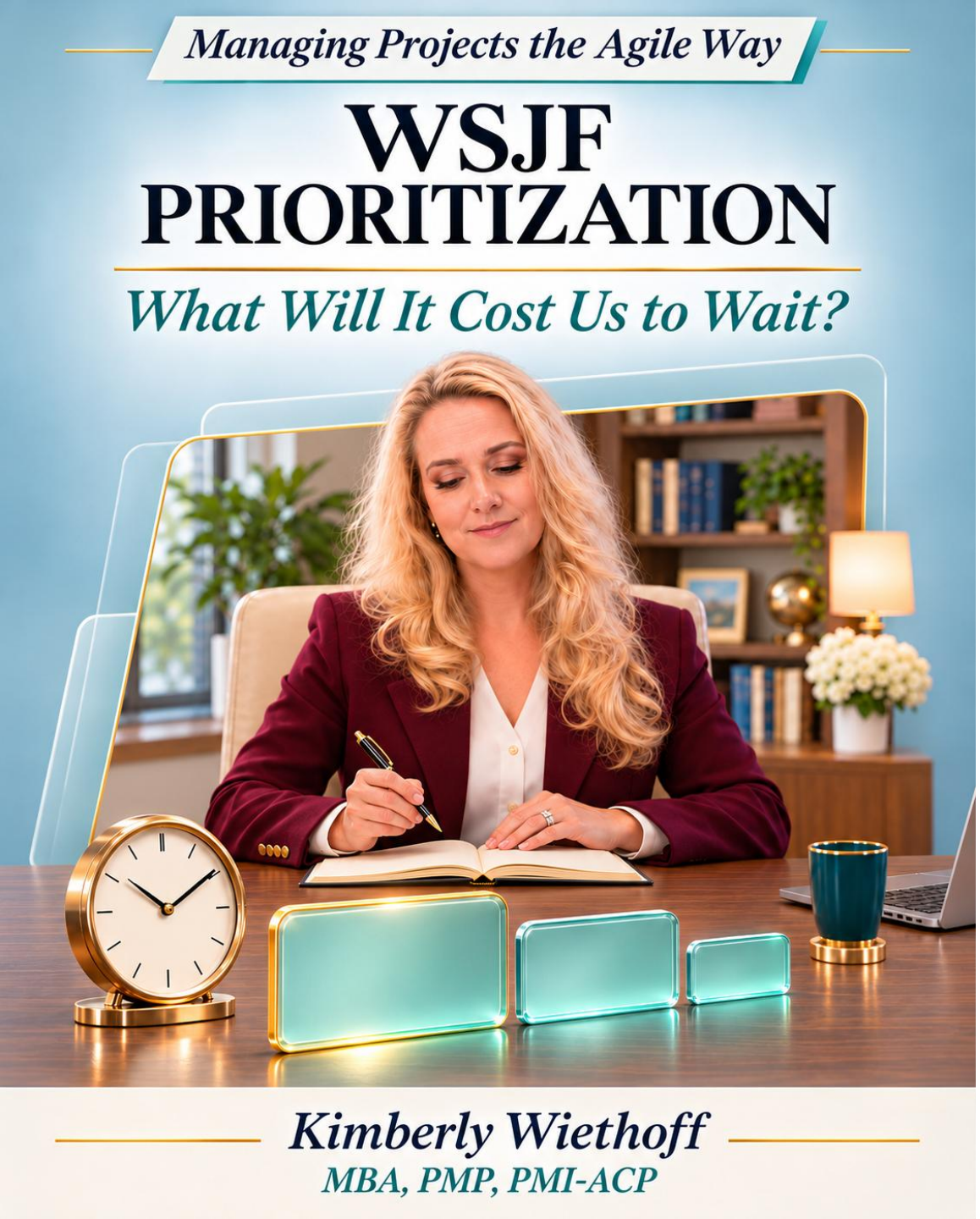

WSJF Prioritization
What Will It Cost Us to Wait?

by **Kimberly Wiethoff, MBA, PMP, PMI-ACP**

AGILE PRIORITIZATION | SAFE FRAMEWORK | AI PORTFOLIO MANAGEMENT

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#WSJF #CostOfDelay #AgilePrioritization #PortfolioManagement #ProgramManagement #AIProgramManagement #ProductManagement #ManagingProjectsTheAgileWay



The Setup: One Team, Three Competing Requests

Your AI portfolio has one engineering team available and three requests arriving at the same time. Each has a reasonable business case — and each sponsor believes their project should go first.

🏥 Operations

An AI assistant that drafts **claim denial summaries** to reduce manual staff effort and speed up review cycles.

⚙️ Platform Team

A **reusable AI evaluation workflow** for validating releases across multiple teams before production deployment.

🔗 Integration Lead

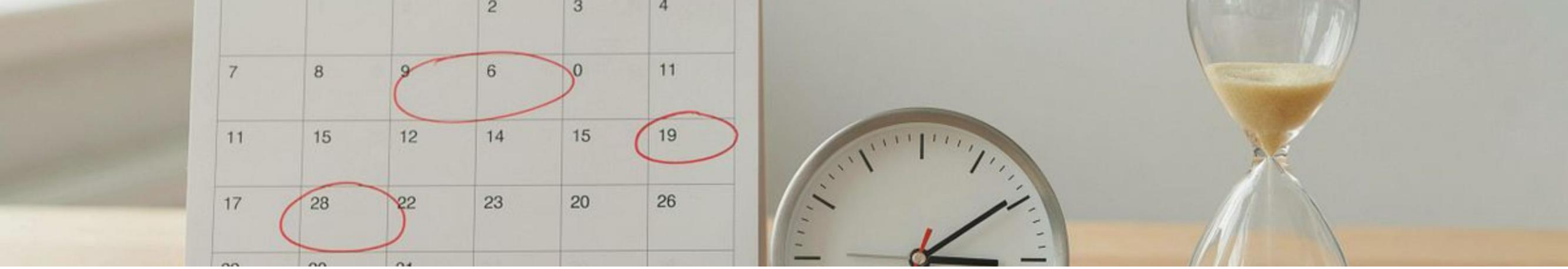
An **eligibility connection update** required before a trading partner retires its current interface on a confirmed date.



The Question Every Sponsor Must Answer

> What happens if we wait six weeks?

Before debating priorities, ask each project sponsor to answer this single question. The answers reveal consequences that a business case alone rarely surfaces — and those consequences are what should drive sequencing decisions in a constrained portfolio.



Three Projects, Three Different Costs of Waiting

Denial-Summary Pilot

Every week of delay postpones the opportunity to test real time savings with staff. The longer it waits, the longer operations absorbs manual effort that could have been measured and reduced.

AI Evaluation Workflow

Several upcoming releases are planned to use this workflow. Delay creates a bottleneck: teams either wait on their releases or proceed without consistent evaluation controls.

Eligibility Integration

A partner cutover date is confirmed. Missing it could interrupt an existing workflow that the business depends on — not a theoretical risk, but an operational consequence with a calendar date attached.

Once these consequences are visible side by side, the portfolio has a far better basis for deciding what goes first — and why.



FRAMEWORK

What Is Weighted Shortest Job First?

The Core Idea

WSJF compares the **relative cost of delaying** a piece of work against its estimated size. Used in the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe), it gives portfolio leaders a defensible, repeatable way to sequence competing work for a shared team.

The Formula

Cost of Delay = User & Business Value + Time Criticality + Risk Reduction or Opportunity Enablement

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WSJF = Cost of Delay ÷ Job Size

Job size is a proxy for relative duration — not hours or story points, but a shared sense of how large this effort is compared to others on the same board.



The Four Scoring Factors — and What to Ask

1 User and Business Value

Who benefits once this is delivered, and what measurable outcome improves? Push sponsors to name the specific role, process, or metric that changes.

2 Time Criticality

What changes if we deliver next month versus next quarter? Is there a firm date — a partner cutover, a regulatory deadline — where consequences escalate? A score of 13 versus 3 demands an operational explanation.

3 Risk Reduction or Opportunity Enablement

What risk does this work mitigate? What future work can proceed only after this item is complete? This factor rewards foundational and unblocking work.

4 Job Size

How large is the smallest usable version — once you include integration, testing, review cycles, and rollout? Smaller scope raises WSJF; larger scope lowers it.

SCORING SCALE

Using a Relative Fibonacci Scale

WSJF uses a shared relative scale — typically **1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 13** — where numbers represent relative magnitude, not absolute hours or dollars. Every score is an estimate relative to the other items in the same planning session.

Ask the sponsor to explain the difference between a 5 and a 13 in operational terms. A confirmed cutover date earns a 13. "By quarter-end" needs a consequence before it does.

What Each Level Signals

1–2: Minimal urgency or size

Delay has little near-term consequence; the work is small and predictable.

5–8: Moderate weight

Real consequences exist, but timing has some flexibility. Effort is meaningful.

13: High urgency or size

A firm date, major disruption risk, or large scope that the team must plan around explicitly.

WORKED EXAMPLE

How One AI Portfolio Might Score the Work

Three items compete for the same engineering team in the same planning window. The team uses a shared relative scale of 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 13. Scores are illustrative.

Backlog Item	Business Value	Time Criticality	Risk / Enablement	Cost of Delay	Job Size	WSJF
Eligibility integration update	8	13	8	29	5	**5.8**
Reusable AI evaluation workflow	5	3	13	21	5	**4.2**
Denial-summary pilot with staff review	13	5	3	21	8	**2.6**

Business value includes user and business value. Scores are rounded to one decimal place.



Reading the Scores: Why This Sequence?

1 2 3

1st: Eligibility Integration (5.8)

(8 + 13 + 8) ÷ 5 = 5.8. A confirmed partner cutover date and the risk of disrupting an existing workflow push it to the top — regardless of the fact that its business value score isn't the highest.

2nd: Evaluation Workflow (4.2)

Its risk reduction score of 13 reflects the fact that several planned AI releases depend on this work. It unlocks future delivery for multiple teams, making it a force multiplier worth prioritizing early.

3rd: Denial-Summary Pilot (2.6)

The highest direct business value of the three — but its larger job size (8) divides the same Cost of Delay score and places it third in this initial sequence. Rescoping could change this ranking.

Turning the Ranking Into a Delivery Plan

A WSJF ranking is a starting point, not a final schedule. Once you have a sequence, translate it into a concrete plan with dates, dependencies, and decision triggers.



Three Planning Moves That Make the Sequence Real

Work Backward From the Partner Cutover

Confirm the exact date. Reserve time for development, end-to-end testing, and cutover. If partner testing is available only during a specific window, put that window in the plan and identify the latest safe start date.

Map What the Evaluation Workflow Unlocks

Ask which releases will use it and when. If the denial-summary pilot requires evaluation checks before staff can use it, schedule that dependency explicitly. Consider delivering a small set of evaluation checks first, with broader reuse added later.

Rescore the Smallest Usable Pilot

Start with one denial category and a small reviewer group. If the smaller pilot still scores 21 on Cost of Delay and engineering sizes it at 3, its WSJF rises to **7.0** — potentially moving it up the board. Recheck value and urgency whenever scope changes.

SCOPE SENSITIVITY

Why Rescoping Can Change Everything

Original Pilot Score

Cost of Delay: **21**
Job Size: **8**
WSJF: **2.6**

Full scope — multiple denial categories, expanded reporting, and larger reviewer group — produces a larger job size that suppresses the score.

Rescoped Pilot Score

Cost of Delay: **21**
Job Size: **3**
WSJF: **7.0**

One denial category, one small reviewer group, manual feedback tracking. Same business urgency — but a dramatically different sequence position. **Scope reduction is a prioritization lever.**

Even if a rescored item moves up the ranking, always schedule around the partner's latest safe start date and any evaluation prerequisites first.



CHAPTER 2

How WSJF Compares With Other Prioritization Methods

WSJF is one tool in a portfolio manager's kit. Understanding where each method fits helps you apply the right one at the right moment — without forcing every decision through a single framework.

Four Methods, Four Decisions

Method	The Decision It Supports	Example
WSJF	What should the shared team do first?	Sequence the eligibility update, evaluation workflow, and denial-summary pilot for one engineering team.
RICE	Which idea offers the strongest reach and impact relative to effort after accounting for confidence?	Compare two AI features by expected claim volume, impact on staff time, and confidence in the estimates.
MoSCoW	What must fit within the release?	Make staff review a Must Have for the pilot and expanded reporting a Could Have in this release.
Value vs. Effort	Which ideas deserve a closer look?	Screen a long list of proposed automations before asking engineering for detailed estimates.

RICE and MoSCoW: Practical Guidance

RICE: Reach × Impact × Confidence ÷ Effort

Estimate how many people or transactions an idea affects over a defined period, how much it will help each one, and how confident you are in those estimates. For the denial-summary pilot, use recent claim volumes for reach and time a sample of reviews to estimate minutes saved per claim. If savings are still a guess, a lower confidence score reflects that honestly.

MoSCoW: Release Scope Decisions

Must Haves are essential for the release to be usable. Should Haves matter but have temporary workarounds. Could Haves fit if capacity allows. Won't Haves are explicitly deferred.

- **Must Have:** Staff review in the denial-summary pilot
- **Should Have:** Reviewer dashboard (if manual tracking works)
- **Could Have:** Expanded reporting
- **Won't Have:** Additional denial categories this release

Using All Four Together



Value vs. Effort at Intake

Place proposals on a two-axis matrix before investing in detailed estimates. High-value, low-effort ideas are quick win candidates. Low-value, high-effort ideas can be set aside immediately.



WSJF for Team Sequencing

Use when qualified work is competing for a shared team. WSJF surfaces the cost of waiting so the portfolio can sequence on economic grounds, not political ones.



RICE for Feature Comparison

Apply when comparing feature opportunities with measurable reach — such as two AI assistants serving different claim volumes — and you need confidence-weighted estimates.



MoSCoW for Release Planning

Apply once a team is building. MoSCoW draws a clear line between what must ship and what can wait, reducing last-minute scope debates and protecting delivery commitments.

CHAPTER 3

The Role of the Program Manager

WSJF is a facilitation tool as much as a scoring model. The program manager's job is to get the right people in the room, ask the questions that surface assumptions, and capture the decisions so the team knows when to revisit them.



Facilitating a Productive Scoring Session

1

Assemble the Right Voices

Bring product, operations, engineering, and the relevant security, compliance, and platform owners into the same discussion. Product and operations explain business impact. Engineering estimates scope. Other owners identify reviews and dependencies that affect the schedule.

2

Score One Factor at a Time

Score time criticality across all backlog items before moving to the next factor. Agree on a reference item for each factor. When one person scores 5 and another scores 13, ask what each is assuming — the disagreement is usually the most valuable part of the session.

3

Name the Assumptions

If the ranking depends on three teams adopting the evaluation workflow, name someone to confirm which teams have committed and by when. Unvalidated assumptions embedded in a WSJF score can produce a misleading sequence.

4

Record the Decision

Capture what starts first, what moves to the next planning window, who owns the decision, and what would trigger a rescore. A changed cutover date, a smaller pilot, or newly available engineering capacity can all change the sequence.

LEADERSHIP QUESTIONS

Questions Leadership Should Ask at Every Portfolio Review

Cost of Waiting

What do we lose if this waits one planning cycle, and who specifically feels the impact — a partner, an operations team, a release waiting to be validated?

Firm Dates

Which dates are confirmed by an external party, and what operational consequence follows if we miss each one? "By quarter-end" is not a firm date until someone names the consequence.

What Does This Unlock?

What future work does this item enable, and which teams are ready to use it? Foundational work earns a higher risk-reduction score when the downstream users are named and committed.

Smallest Usable Version

What is the smallest version that delivers a usable outcome, and how would rescoping change the WSJF score? Scope reduction is often the fastest path to moving an item up the board.

Key Assumptions

Which single assumption could change our decision? Who will verify it, and by when? Unvalidated assumptions should be assigned to an owner before the session ends.

Your Next Step: One Question, Two Items

A Practical Exercise for Your Next Portfolio Review

Pick two items competing for the same team. Ask each sponsor to explain what happens if their item waits until the next planning cycle. If the answer changes the sequence, record the reason alongside the decision so the team knows when to revisit it.

> What's one item on your roadmap that would move up if you looked at the cost of waiting?

Framework reference: **Scaled Agile Framework's WSJF guidance**

About the Author

Kimberly Wiethoff, MBA, PMP, PMI-ACP is a Senior Program Manager specializing in enterprise digital transformation, AI-enabled delivery, PMO leadership, and Agile program execution.

Through *Managing Projects the Agile Way*, she shares practical strategies that help organizations modernize project delivery while preparing leaders for the future of AI-enabled program management.

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