

Finance · Prioritization

Which Finance Problem Should We Address First?

A high score is useful only if the conditions behind it are visible. Check the measure, decision rights and review capacity before choosing the first improvement.

What you finish with: A shortlist checked against three things: how you will measure the improvement, who can make the required decisions, and whether your team has time to review the remaining work. Unanswered questions stay visible.

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EXAMPLE / REVIEW CAPACITY

Check the window before ranking the idea.

KNOWN BASIS

Commentary review

40 reviews × 9 minutes + 6 rewrites × 20 minutes.

8h needed / 9h available

OPEN INPUT

Invoice exceptions

5 hours of initial checking, plus rework. First-day capacity is not stated.

Readiness unknown

Commentary capacity: 3 days × 3 reviewer hours. Confirm the measure, decision owner and arrival window for each candidate.

Scoring is the reflex. Value on one axis, feasibility on the other, and the shortlist falls out of the grid. It is a reasonable way to compare options, and on its own it answers the wrong question first.

A score that hides unresolved start conditions cannot tell you whether a candidate can start next month. That is where programmes stall. A high-scoring candidate with no owner who can change the work, no measure anyone can produce, and a remainder larger than the review capacity available is not a first project. It is a proposal waiting for three things nobody has been asked to supply.

So run three readiness checks first, on a bounded first improvement rather than on the full ambition. These are not universal barriers, and a candidate that fails one is not a bad candidate. It is a candidate whose next step is to close the gap rather than to start. These checks support prioritization; capability, cost, data permission and required approvals still need confirmation before a test starts.

A scoring model may include these conditions as criteria, and several do. The problem is scoring that omits them, or buries them inside a feasibility number that hides which of the three is missing.

01 Check one: is there a measure, or can one be established inside the first scope?

The strongest position is a measure that appears in a report today, with a number in it, pulled rather than estimated. Prefer that where it exists.

Where it does not, the question is not whether a measure is missing but how much it costs to establish. A count that a system can produce, a two week sample of a queue, or a tally kept during one cycle is a proportionate baseline, and it can sit inside the first scope rather than in front of it. A baseline does not necessarily consume a quarter, and treating it as though it always does disqualifies work that is ready.

What is not proportionate is a measure that needs an instrumented process change, a negotiation about method, or a study nobody has resourced. That work is legitimate and it is a project of its own. Name it, and rank the candidate on the assumption that its start date is after that project, not before it.

If the measure exists but nobody has pulled it recently, that is a task. If establishing it would take longer than the improvement it is meant to evidence, the candidate goes back.

02 Check two: is there a named accountable owner with the decision rights the change needs?

Not a sponsor. Someone accountable for the outcome who can alter the sequence, the coding convention, the approval, or the tool the team actually opens.

Sponsorship and decision rights get confused here, and the confusion is expensive. An executive sponsor can fund a project and cannot make forty people work differently. The person who can do that sits closer to the work, and is the one who has to accept the outcome when an output is wrong.

The check is answerable in one sentence: name the person, and state what they can decide without asking. A matrix or a shared service boundary does not disqualify a candidate. Cross-functional work is ready when the owners involved have an agreed decision right, written down, that covers the change in question. It is not ready when the agreement has still to be reached, and the honest position then is that reaching it is the first task.

03 Check three: does the remainder fit the review capacity available in the window?

Assume the technology works as described. What is left for a person to check, how much of it is there, when does it arrive, and who is available to do it?

Work the arithmetic in four parts: items reaching the review point, minutes per item, the window those minutes have to fit inside, and the reviewer capacity actually available in that window. Then add the effort that follows a rejected or corrected item, because correction and rework are part of the burden and are routinely left out.

Two hundred items at four minutes is 800 minutes, which is 13 hours 20 minutes. That is not nothing. Inside a two day close, with one reviewer who has an assumed 14 productive hours across those two days, it consumes 13 hours 20 minutes of the 14 and leaves 40 minutes.

Spread across a month of twenty working days it is 40 minutes a day, which is affordable if that reviewer has 40 minutes a day. The same number carries opposite verdicts depending on when the work lands and who is free when it lands, and neither verdict can be reached without stating the capacity.

If the remainder does not fit, the candidate is not first at that scope. It may be first at a narrower scope, which is a better outcome than discovering the problem after a purchase.

04 Example shortlist: four candidates, one quarter

A finance function of about sixty people, four candidates on the list, one quarter to show something.

Candidate	Measure	Accountable owner and decision rights	Remainder, window and capacity
Draft variance commentary for 40 cost centers	Pack completion date, reported monthly	Reporting manager, who sets the pack process	40 drafts read at 9 minutes is 6 hours, plus 6 substantial rewrites at 20 minutes, 2 hours. 8 hours across the three days after close. Reporting manager states 3 hours a day available in that period, so 9 hours capacity against 8 hours of work
Supplier invoice exception routing	Exceptions worked and errors after posting, both in the AP pack	Accounts payable manager, who sets coding and approval routing	300 suggestions checked at 1 minute is 5 hours, arriving as one batch on the first close day, plus rework on corrections. Available reviewer time on that day is not yet stated. Readiness unknown
Forecast scenario modeling	None today. Cycle time and accuracy are not measured, and establishing them needs a method agreement across FP&A and the business units	FP&A director, for the modeling method	Unresolved. Output is judgment, and the reviewer would be the person who built the model
Contract obligation extraction across the supplier base	No obligation count and no error measure. A count could be established from the contract repository inside the first scope	Not named. Sits between legal, procurement and finance with no agreed decision right	Every extraction verified against the contract. Volume unknown until the count is run

What the checks decide. Commentary passes all three on the figures stated, and the capacity assumption is named so it can be challenged. Invoice exceptions passes checks one and two, and check three is unknown rather than passed, because nobody has stated how much reviewer time exists on the first close day. Unknown is a finding, and closing it is a phone call rather than a project.

Forecast modeling is not ready. Its measure needs a method agreement first, and its remainder is unresolved because the output is judgment and the reviewer is the author. Contract extraction is also

not ready, for the more serious reason: no agreed decision right across three functions. That gap is not closed by capability, and it is not closed by a purchase.

The part worth noticing. Assume the organization's comparative estimate of benefits less delivery and operating costs ranks contract extraction highest in this example. Its ownership and review capacity are still unresolved. Agree decision rights, establish the baseline and size the review, then reconsider it when those gaps close. The highest estimated value does not remove the work needed to make it feasible.

Choosing between commentary and invoice exceptions. Commentary is ready on stated figures. Exceptions is ready on everything except a capacity number that has not been asked for. Establish that number first. If reviewer time on the first close day is above 5 hours with room for rework, both are ready and the score is now a reasonable tiebreak. If it is not, take commentary, because its review spreads across three days rather than landing in one batch inside the close.

05 What to do now

Take your current shortlist. Against each candidate write four things: the measure, or the proportionate baseline that can be established inside the first scope; the named person and the decision they can make without asking; the review arithmetic including correction effort; and the reviewer capacity available in the window that work lands in.

Mark anything you cannot answer as unknown rather than assuming it. Unknowns are the cheapest findings on the list, because a question put to a named person closes several of them without funding anything.

Then score what is ready. The ranking is more useful when everything in it can actually be started, and the candidates that are not ready are more useful when each carries the reason, because the reason is the next piece of work.

If nothing on your list is ready, that is the finding, and it is worth more than a shortlist. The first piece of work is not an AI project. It is agreeing an owner, or establishing a measure, and both are cheaper than the project you were about to fund.

Sources. Built from M. Pact material: the measure, guardrail, coverage and remainder distinctions and the review timing and effort calculations in the Process Boundary Guide, and the ownership and evidence tests in MPA-RN-2026-002; the three selection checks are set out in this note.

About this research

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