

[• PRIORITISING DEVELOPMENT • GUIDE](#)

How to prioritise skills *development*

A skills matrix will happily show you a dozen gaps at once, and that is exactly where many teams stall: everything looks important, so nothing gets the focus it needs. The skill that separates a plan that works from one that fizzles is prioritisation, deciding which gaps to close now, which can wait, and which to park. This is how to turn a matrix full of gaps into a focused, sequenced plan.



Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

CMGR · MBA · LLM · DBA

Reading time 12 min · **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework · **Updated** May 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

To prioritise skills development, judge each gap on two things, how critical the skill is to the business and risk, and how big the gap is, then sort them into what to tackle now, next and later. Put compliance and high-risk single-cover gaps first, take the quick wins for momentum, plan the major efforts deliberately, and consciously park the low-value ones. In short: **not every gap is equal, so rank them by criticality and gap size, sequence them into now, next and later, and focus your effort where it matters most.**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Not every gap is equal.** A matrix shows many gaps at once; trying to close them all at once closes none of them well.
- **Rank by criticality and gap size.** How much the skill matters to the business and risk, against how far below target it sits.
- **Compliance and risk come first.** Safety, legal and single-cover gaps are non-negotiable and lead the queue.
- **Sequence into now, next, later.** A simple board turns a long gap list into a focused, ordered plan everyone can see.
- **Take the quick wins.** Small gaps with high impact build momentum while the major efforts are planned.

— [START HERE](#)

A matrix shows every gap *at once*

The great strength of a skills matrix, that it lays bare every gap across the team, is also the trap. Faced with a grid full of shortfalls, the instinct is to try to fix everything, and effort spreads so thin that nothing moves. The discipline that turns a matrix into results is prioritisation: deciding, deliberately, what to work on first.

Two questions rank every gap

Prioritising gaps comes down to two questions. First, **how critical is the skill?**, to safety, compliance, the business strategy, and to resilience: a gap on a single-cover critical skill matters far more than one on a nice-to-have. Second, **how big is the gap?**, the distance between current and required level. Together these rank every gap: a large gap on a critical skill is urgent; a small gap on a peripheral one can wait. Most prioritisation is just applying these two lenses honestly.

Compliance and risk lead the queue

Some gaps are not really a choice. Anything tied to **compliance, safety or legal duty** comes first, because the cost of leaving it is unacceptable, not merely inefficient. So does any **single point of failure**, a critical skill only one person holds, since that is a risk the matrix exists to surface. These lead the queue regardless of gap size. A sound sequence is: compliance and risk first, then the role-essential gaps, then everything else, ordered by impact.

Quick wins and major efforts

Among the rest, it helps to separate **quick wins** from **major efforts**. A quick win is a small gap with high impact, a skill one short coaching session would lift to target, and taking a few of these builds visible momentum and goodwill. A major effort is a large, important gap that needs real time and resource; it deserves a proper plan and milestones, not a rushed attempt. Knowing which is which stops you sinking weeks into a big gap while easy, valuable wins sit untouched.

— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Unfocused development *wastes the effort*

Training time and budget are finite, so spreading them across every gap equally means none gets enough to matter. Prioritisation is how you convert a limited development budget into real, visible capability gains where they count most.

8%

GARTNER, 2024

of organisations have reliable workforce skills data, so most development spend is allocated on instinct, not evidence.

63%

WEF, 2025

of employers call skills gaps the biggest barrier to change, which makes choosing the right gaps to close vital.

85%

WEF, 2025

of employers plan to prioritise upskilling, so the question is increasingly which skills to invest in first.

The cost of unfocused development is quiet but real: budget spent on generic training that does not target the gaps that matter, effort scattered so thinly that no skill actually reaches target, and the genuinely critical gaps, the compliance lapse, the single point of failure, left unaddressed while attention drifts to easier but less important things. A skills matrix makes prioritisation possible by showing every gap and its size in one place; the act of **ranking and sequencing** those gaps is what turns that visibility into a

focused plan. Done well, the same budget delivers far more, because it lands where criticality and gap size say it should.

— THE FOUR PRIORITY TYPES

Four kinds of gap, four responses

Sorting gaps by criticality and size produces four recognisable types, each calling for a different response. Knowing the type tells you what to do with it.

TYPE 01 · DO NOW

Critical & risky

High-criticality gaps, compliance, safety, single points of failure, lead the queue whatever their size. The cost of leaving them is unacceptable, so they are non-negotiable priorities.

TYPE 02 · DO NOW

Quick wins

Small gaps with high impact, a short coaching session from target. Take a few early for momentum and visible progress while bigger efforts are planned.

TYPE 03 · DO NEXT

Major efforts

Large, important gaps that need real time and resource. They matter, but deserve a proper plan with milestones rather than a rushed attempt squeezed in now.

TYPE 04 · DO LATER

Low value

Small gaps on peripheral skills. Consciously park these; spending prime training time here is effort that a more important gap should have had.

The art is in being **honest and deliberate** about which type each gap is, and then acting accordingly. The common failure is to treat every gap as a do-now, which guarantees the critical ones and the quick wins get no more attention than the low-value ones. Sorting first, then sequencing, ensures the non-negotiables are covered, momentum is built, the big efforts are properly resourced, and the trivial is set aside, so finite training effort lands exactly where it should.

— THE SCALE BEHIND THE SCORES

The 0 to 5 capability framework

Prioritising needs a clear measure of gap size, which is exactly what a scored scale gives. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-

Smith, lets you read each gap as a number of levels below target, so "how big is the gap" becomes precise rather than a feeling.

-
- 0** **No skill required or desired** **EXCLUDED**
- Not needed for the role within the next year. In prioritising, it removes non-gaps from the picture, so effort is never aimed at skills that do not matter for the role.
-
- 1** **In training / Trainee** **WEIGHTING 25%**
- Up to 75% trained, not yet across the quality bar. A skill at Level 1 against a target of 3 is a large gap, a likely major effort if the skill is important.
-
- 2** **Developing capabilities** **WEIGHTING 50%**
- More than 75% trained; works alone but quality not yet consistent. A Level 2 against a target of 3 is a one-level gap, often a quick win on an important skill.
-
- 3** **Capable** **WEIGHTING 75% · USUAL TARGET**
- 100% trained, consistent quality, works unsupervised. The usual target, so a person at or above Level 3 on a skill is not a gap to prioritise at all.
-
- 4** **Subject Matter Expert / Trainer** **WEIGHTING 100%**
- Prolonged expertise; can train others. Worth prioritising where you need a second expert for resilience, or to build training capacity.
-
- 5** **Strategic ownership / Leadership** **WEIGHTING 100%**
- Defines processes and standards. A long-horizon priority, usually developed deliberately for succession rather than in a quarterly plan.

Gap size, weighted by criticality

The scale makes gap size exact: the number of levels between current and target. But size alone does not set priority, you weight it by **criticality**. A one-level gap on a safety-critical, single-cover skill outranks a two-level gap on a peripheral one. A simple way to combine them: rank highest the gaps that are both critical and sizeable, take the small-gap, high-impact ones as quick wins, and park the small-gap, low-impact ones.

A worked example. Two gaps, ranked by criticality not just size:

```
Gap A  Safeguarding, single cover, Level 2 vs target 3 (1
level, critical)
Gap B  Advanced reporting, Level 1 vs target 3 (2 levels,
nice-to-have)
priority → Gap A first - smaller, but critical and single-
cover wins.
```

— [SEE THE PLAN](#)

Gaps sorted into *now, next, later*

Here is a team's gaps turned into a plan, sorted onto a simple board. Now holds the non-negotiables and the quick wins; next holds the major efforts that need resourcing; later holds the low-value gaps, consciously parked. This is what prioritisation looks like in practice: a long gap list become a focused, ordered plan.

**NOW · THIS
QUARTER**

Critical, plus quick wins

Safeguarding

L2 → 3 · SINGLE
COVER

Refresher + sign-off;
close the single-
cover risk.

Critical

CRM reporting

L2 → 3 · ONE LEVEL

One coaching
session; small gap,
high impact.

Quick win

**Complaint
handling**

L2 → 3 · ONE LEVEL

Shadowing +
practice; lifts service
fast.

Quick win

NEXT · PLAN IT

Major efforts, resourced

Data analysis

L1 → 3 · TWO
LEVELS

Course plus a project
to own; needs real
time.

Major

Coaching others

L1 → 3 · TWO
LEVELS

Develop a second
trainer for resilience.

Major

LATER · PARK IT

Low value, for now

Legacy system

L1 → 2 ·
PERIPHERAL

Being retired; not
worth the effort now.

Niche reporting

L2 → 3 · RARELY
USED

Revisit next cycle if
demand grows.

3

gaps for this quarter: one critical, two quick wins, with the major efforts queued and the rest parked

Illustrative plan on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. Gaps sorted by criticality and size into what to do now, next and later.

HOW THE BOARD WAS BUILT

- **Critical leads, whatever its size.** Safeguarding is only a one-level gap, but it is safety-critical and single-cover, so it goes straight into Now ahead of larger but less important gaps.
- **Quick wins ride alongside.** CRM reporting and complaint handling are one-level gaps a single session can close, high impact for low effort, so they join Now to build momentum.
- **Major efforts are queued, not rushed.** The two-level gaps on data analysis and coaching matter, but need a course and real time, so they go to Next with a proper plan rather than being crammed in now.
- **Low value is parked on purpose.** A retiring system and a rarely-used report go to Later. Parking them deliberately is not neglect, it is protecting effort for the gaps that matter.

— DOING IT

Five steps to prioritise development

Turning a matrix full of gaps into a focused plan takes one short session. These five steps keep the prioritisation honest, evidence-based and actionable.

1

List the gaps from the matrix

Pull every gap, where current sits below required, from the matrix, with its size in levels. Starting from the real, scored data keeps the exercise grounded in evidence rather than impression, and ensures no significant gap is quietly forgotten.

2

Rate each gap's criticality

For each gap, judge how critical the skill is, to compliance and safety, to strategy, and to resilience (is it single-cover?). This is the lens that matters most; a modest gap on a critical skill outranks a big gap on a peripheral one.

3

Sort into now, next, later

Place each gap on the board: compliance, risk and quick wins into Now; major important efforts into Next; low-value gaps into Later. The board makes the plan visible and forces the honest choice of what not to do this cycle.

4

Resource the now column properly

Check that the Now column is actually achievable with the time and budget you have. If it is overloaded, move something to Next, a focused plan that delivers three gaps beats an ambitious one that delivers none. Protect the column's realism.

5

Act, then re-prioritise next cycle

Turn the Now column into concrete actions with owners and dates, deliver them, then re-score and rebuild the board next cycle. Prioritisation is not a one-off; as gaps close and the business shifts, the queue reorders, so revisit it each review.

— AVOID THESE

Six mistakes in prioritising development

MISTAKE 01

Treating every gap as urgent

Trying to close them all closes none well. Sort deliberately into now, next and later.

MISTAKE 02

Ranking by size alone

The biggest gap is not always the most important. Weight gap size by how critical the skill is.

MISTAKE 03

Skipping compliance

Safety and legal gaps are non-negotiable. They lead the queue regardless of how small they look.

MISTAKE 04

Ignoring quick wins

Small, high-impact gaps build momentum cheaply. Do not let them sit while you wrestle a big one.

MISTAKE 05

Overloading "now"

A Now column bigger than your budget delivers nothing. Keep it realistic and move the rest to Next.

MISTAKE 06

Prioritising once

Gaps close and priorities shift. Rebuild the board each cycle, not just at the start.

The method is free. A ready-made matrix just makes the gaps and their sizes *fall out ready to rank*.

Everything here works in a blank spreadsheet, and that is a fine place to start. A purpose-built template just makes prioritising easier: with current and required levels in place, every gap and its size are calculated for you, so you can see at a glance which are large, which touch critical skills, and which are single-cover, and sort them into now, next and later from evidence rather than instinct.



The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix calculates every gap and its size against target, the raw material for ranking by criticality and sorting into a now, next and later plan, all on the same 0 to 5 framework used throughout this guide.

<p>TRY IT FREE</p> <p>£0</p> <p>The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. See the gaps ready to rank.</p>	<p>MOST POPULAR</p> <p>£199</p> <p>The full Excel template: current and required levels, calculated gaps and analytics, up to 30 people and 30 skills. One-off, yours forever.</p>	<p>WHEN YOU ARE READY</p> <p>£1</p> <p>Upgrade to PulseAI in your first year for a living, web and mobile version with AI skill suggestions and reminders.</p>
---	---	---

— COMMON QUESTIONS

Quick *answers*

Q How do I prioritise which skills gaps to close first?

Judge each gap on two things: how critical the skill is to the business, safety and resilience, and how big the gap is in levels. Then sort them, compliance and risk first, then quick wins, then major efforts, then low-value gaps, into what to tackle now, next and later. Criticality matters more than raw size.

Q What should always come first?

Anything tied to compliance, safety or legal duty, and any single point of failure, a critical skill only one person holds. These lead the queue regardless of gap size, because the cost of leaving them is unacceptable rather than merely inefficient, and surfacing exactly these risks is one of the main reasons to have a matrix.

Q What is a quick win?

A small gap on an important skill, often just one level below target, that a short coaching session, some shadowing or a little practice can close. Taking a few quick wins early delivers visible progress and builds momentum and goodwill while the larger, slower development efforts are being planned and resourced.

Q How is this different from a gap analysis?

A gap analysis identifies and measures the gaps; prioritisation decides what to do about them and in what order. The analysis is the input, a list of gaps and their sizes, and prioritisation is the step that turns that list into a focused, sequenced plan by weighting each gap's size against how critical the skill is.

Q How many gaps should I tackle at once?

Only as many as your time and budget can genuinely close. An overloaded "now" delivers nothing, so keep that column realistic, a handful of gaps, and queue the rest. A focused plan that closes three gaps well beats an ambitious one that half-closes ten and finishes none.

Q How often should I re-prioritise?

Each development or review cycle, typically quarterly. As gaps close, new ones appear and business priorities shift, so the ranking changes. Rebuilding the now, next and later board when you re-score keeps your development effort aimed at what matters most right now, rather than at last quarter's priorities.

— ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

CMGR · MBA · LLM · DBA

Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

Connect on LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/alexmartinsmith](https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexmartinsmith)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith".

Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

— SOURCES

Gartner. (2024). *Talent management research: Workforce skills data*. Gartner.

Martin-Smith, A. J. (n.d.). *The 0 to 5 capability framework*. Upleashed Limited.
<https://upleashed.com/capability-framework/>

World Economic Forum. (2025). *The future of jobs report 2025*. World Economic Forum.

Focus where it *matters most*.

You now have the prioritisation method. The quickest way to start is to list your gaps from the matrix, mark the critical and single-cover ones, and sort the lot into now, next and later. A focused plan that closes the gaps that matter beats a scattered one that touches them all and moves none.

[Try the free 5x5 builder →](#)

[Get the template, £199](#)

Award-winning method · 148,000+ teams · instant download · single-team licence

Skills Matrix Template — the award-winning Excel skills matrix by Upleashed. skillsmatrixtemplate.com
Powered by [Upleashed Limited](https://upleashed.com) · upleashed.com