

YOUR PILOT IS NOT A PILOT

A practical framework for evaluating fitness software
the right way, before you sign anything.

THE PROBLEM

Some gyms evaluate fitness software the wrong way. They sit through a rehearsed demo, get handed a login, and make a decision worth years of contract value on a gut feeling. When it goes wrong the consequences are real: members who cannot book a class, payments that fail, new joiners who download the app and delete it within 48 hours, and staff burning time every day on workarounds that were never supposed to exist.

WHAT THIS IS

This document gives you the thinking framework and the evaluation tools to make a software decision properly. It covers the mistakes most gyms make, how to define your requirements before anyone shows you a product, how to score and compare vendors, and what a real evaluation should look like. Use it for a new purchase or to audit software you already have in place.

MULTI YEAR RISK

Most contracts run to multiple years. This is not a decision to make on a demo.

CROSS FUNCTIONAL

The right evaluation involves every team that will use or be affected by the software.

BEFORE AND AFTER

Use this before you buy, or to audit what you already have. Both situations apply.



How Gyms Get This Wrong

Four common evaluation mistakes and why they happen.

THE MISTAKES

Before you can evaluate software properly you need to understand how some gyms approach it and why those approaches fail. The patterns below are common. None of them are a substitute for a structured evaluation.

THE LOGIN PILOT

"We gave them access and let them try it."

Handing someone a login is not a pilot. Without structure, agreed KPIs, the right stakeholders, and a clear purpose, access produces nothing useful. People poke around for a few days, form an incomplete opinion, and the deal drifts. A real evaluation needs to be designed, not improvised.

THE REHEARSED DEMO

"We watched them present the software."

Demos are controlled. The vendor chooses what you see and in what order. Some vendors have improved on this by using a "job to be done" format where you bring a real task and they show you how the software handles it live. That is better. But it still fails if you have not defined your requirements first. You end up watching something impressive and still not knowing if it solves your actual problem.

THE TICK BOX TENDER

"We asked vendors if they could do X and they said yes."

A yes in a response document is a promise, not evidence. If your tender asks whether the software can perform a specific function, make sure you actually see it done before you score it. Many gyms have signed contracts based on vendor assurances that turned out to mean "yes, with significant configuration" or "yes, that is on the roadmap."

BUYING FOR TODAY ONLY

"It does what we need right now."

Software decisions need to account for where you are going, not just where you are. If you plan to add new sites, revenue streams, service lines, or member demographics in the next two to three years, the software needs to cover that too. Growing out of a platform eighteen months after signing is one of the most avoidable and expensive situations in fitness operations.



The MoSCoW Framework

Define what you need before anyone shows you anything.

WHAT IS MoSCoW?

MoSCoW is a prioritisation method originally developed for software projects. Applied to a software evaluation it forces your team to agree on what actually matters before a vendor walks in the room. Without it, every requirement feels equally important and every impressive feature becomes a reason to buy. The framework has four categories.

M — MUST HAVE

Not negotiable. The software must do this or it does not qualify for serious consideration. Be disciplined here. If everything is a Must Have, nothing is. Important nuance: if a vendor cannot meet a Must Have, the conversation does not end. It changes. It becomes a negotiation about whether they can build it, on what timeline, at what cost, and with what risk.

S — SHOULD HAVE

Important but not critical. You can work around the absence for now but it will create friction. Should Haves carry significant weight in your scoring. A vendor who covers all Must Haves but misses several Should Haves is still a risk worth naming.

C — COULD HAVE

Desirable features that would add value but are not central to your decision. Nice to have once Must Haves and Should Haves are covered. Be careful: vendors are good at demoing Could Haves. Do not let them drive a buying decision.

W — WON'T HAVE RIGHT NOW

Out of scope for this evaluation. Not a permanent no, just not relevant right now. Agreeing on these is as important as agreeing on Must Haves. It stops vendors selling you features you will never use and keeps the evaluation focused.

WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED?

Every team that will use or be affected by the software. That means involved throughout, not just consulted at the start. Sales and marketing if they will use CRM or campaign features. Finance if they touch billing or reporting. Operations, PTs, front desk. These people are the subject matter experts in their areas. You are not. Build the requirements list with them, run the pilot with them, and make sure their verdict carries weight in the final decision. A pilot that only involves the project lead or IT team will miss the problems that surface on the ground. By the time those problems appear, you have already signed.



Running the Evaluation

What a pilot might look like and the scoring tool to use.

WHAT A PILOT MIGHT LOOK LIKE — A SUGGESTED APPROACH

SUGGESTED WEEK 1 — THE OPERATOR EXPERIENCE

Consider starting with a setup session to agree the purpose, KPIs, and what success looks like before anyone logs in. Each team then uses the platform from their own angle with a short task. Cross functional means genuinely cross functional: sales, marketing, finance, operations, PTs, front desk. Assess soft skills throughout: training quality, onboarding process, and support for new starters. End with a structured review.

SUGGESTED WEEK 2 — THE MEMBER EXPERIENCE

Before this phase begins, map your customer journey and every member persona: the early morning lifter, the class regular, the yoga and pilates member, the older member less comfortable with apps, the younger member who will not tolerate friction. Walk the experience for each. Do not only test your most engaged members. That is where the experience gaps that drive churn tend to hide. End with a full review against your requirements list. Two weeks is a suggested minimum. Adjust to your context.

THE SCORING TOOL: WEIGHTED DECISION MATRIX

Once you have your MoSCoW list, the next step is scoring vendors against it using a Weighted Decision Matrix, also known as a Pugh Matrix or Multi Criteria Decision Analysis. It is the standard method for structured procurement decisions in technology, comparing vendors against requirements where not all criteria carry the same weight.

THE LOGIC

By weighting each requirement by importance first, then multiplying by the vendor score, the things that matter most drive the outcome. A vendor who scores well on low importance features but poorly on critical ones ends up lower than one who delivers where it counts. The maths does the honest work that gut feel cannot.



The Scoring Framework

Why it works, how to use it, and the traps to avoid.

WHY IT WORKS

Objective and defensible.

The scoring gives you a documented basis for the decision. If it is ever questioned by leadership, a board, or a procurement team, you have a structured record.

Amplifies what matters.

High importance scores on critical requirements mean a vendor cannot hide weak performance there behind strong scores on things that matter less to your business.

Separates evaluation from sales.

The decision is made on your criteria, not on whoever gave the most polished presentation or had the best existing relationship with your team.

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

Requirement	Category	Importance (1/3/9)	Vendor Score (1-5)	Weighted Total
Member app booking flow	M	9	4	36
CRM and lead tracking	S	3	3	9
PT session management	M	9	5	45
Automated payment retry	S	3	2	6
Class waitlist management	C	1	4	4

THE PITFALLS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Central tendency bias.

Evaluators tend to score everything in the middle and you lose differentiation. Avoid it by using a 1/3/9 importance scale instead of 1 to 5. It forces a clear call: low, medium, or critical. No hiding in the middle.

Must Have contamination.

If a vendor fails a Must Have, they should be disqualified before scoring starts, not just end up with a lower total. Must Haves are a binary gate. Apply them first.

Ignoring soft factors.

The matrix scores features, not relationships, responsiveness, or vendor stability. Run the scoring process alongside a qualitative assessment of training quality, onboarding, ongoing support, and your read on the vendor as a long term partner.



Workbook

Use this to log your requirements and score your vendors.

YOUR REQUIREMENTS TABLE

List each requirement, assign a MoSCoW category, and score its importance before you see any vendor. Fill in the vendor columns during or after each evaluation.

Requirement	Category	Importance (1/3/9)	Vendor A	Vendor B

EVALUATION CHECKLIST

- Requirements agreed by all relevant stakeholders before any demo.
- MoSCoW categories assigned. Must Haves applied as a binary gate before scoring.
- Importance scores set using 1/3/9 scale to avoid central tendency bias.
- Every Must Have seen done live, not just confirmed in a response document.
- Two week pilot completed: operator experience in week one, member experience in week two.
- Soft skills assessed: training quality, onboarding plan, new starter support.
- Vendor responsiveness and relationship quality assessed qualitatively.
- Member personas identified and tested across demographics.
- Growth requirements checked: does it cover where you are heading?
- Gaps documented with proposed workarounds or integration options.
- Final decision made against the matrix, not the quality of the demo.

Want help running this process?

I work with gym operators to evaluate, implement, and get more from fitness technology. If you want a direct conversation about your software decision, book a call.

