FINDING AND WASTING TIME

The diary of a mad (project) manager

Time. We always need more and on the rare occasions we find more, we waste it and lose it all over again. Jeff Pinto explores why.

When running projects, we all know that time is perhaps our most precious commodity. We fight for more, we hoard what we have and, unfortunately, we often find unique (but very predictable) ways of squandering this resource. This latter point is a troubling statement, but from years of experience, research, teaching project managers and listening to their confessions (sometimes I feel like a cross between neighbourhood barman and counsellor), I've noticed a common pattern that emerges with so many of us when it comes to trying to build extra time into the project schedule. The nearly uncanny joint ability to employ our best efforts to waste it.

Finding time in the project schedule

Let me suggest that as humans, we have an impressive ability to do two things: protect ourselves from sources of risk and make potentially self-defeating decisions. This is often found in the early stages of a typical project, where we develop our Work Breakdown Structure of project activities and begin to assign likely duration estimates to them. It's all part of the process of building a reasonable project schedule. But there's a catch, isn't there?

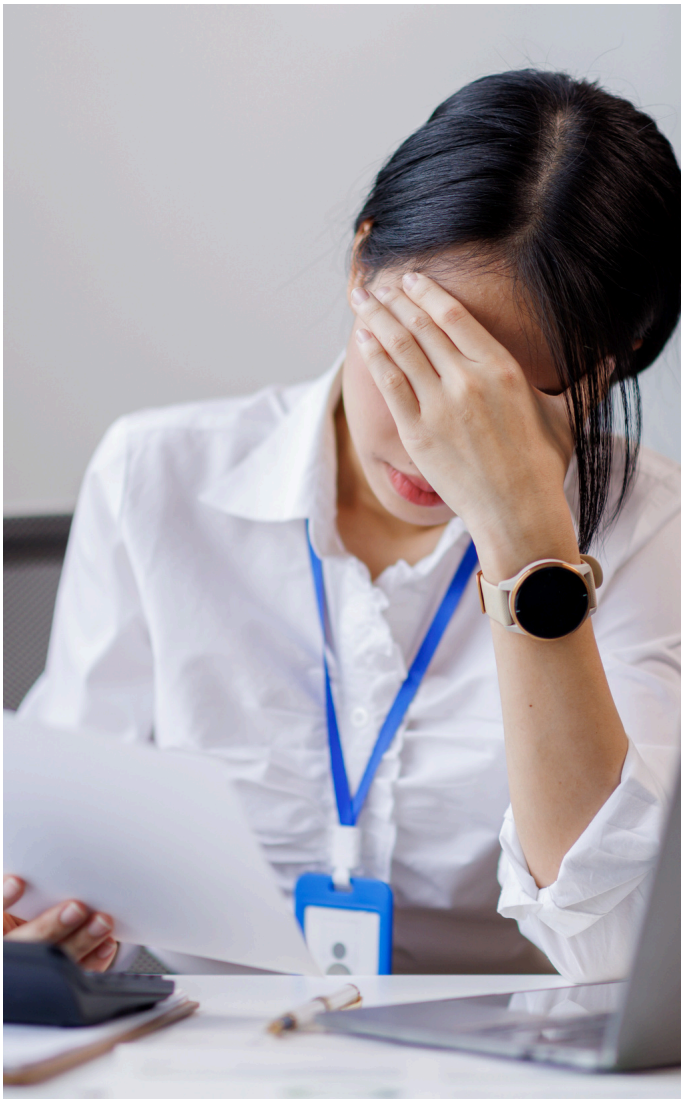
We've all heard of GIGO (garbage in – garbage out) when it comes to project planning. This problem pops up in spades, particularly when it comes to estimating the likely duration of activities we've been assigned. Let's consider three common mistakes that occur again and again in the early activity duration cycle, and ask yourself which of these mistakes you and other members of your firm most commonly make.

Mistake one: Building in personal safety

Asking project team members if they're likely to pad their duration estimates is touchy; we know we want to do it and we often have seemingly legitimate reasons for doing it but are loathe to admit it. The fact is that for many of us, the reasons for adding safety (which sounds much better than 'padding', doesn't it?) are often very practical and, on the surface, make excellent sense.

Suppose for example, you're asked for an estimate to complete Activity D in the project. As part of those calculations, you can't simply think about that activity; you must also consider everything else you are currently doing (all the other balls you are juggling while trying to add a new one to your set). Your calculations are based on volume of work just as much as they are based on the actual process of completing Activity D. This is why we so often tell novice project managers to remember that days in an activity estimate are not the same thing as calendar days.

So, with this idea in mind, think about an activity and its likely duration. We know that when it comes to estimating how long a task should take, we can't use a simple normal distribution of likelihood – that won't work because experience tells us that while we may complete an activity on time (or even a little bit early on occasion), it's much more common for events and outside pressures to cause our activity duration to slide, sometimes massively.



A missed delivery, lots of rework, changes to specs midstream...these are just some of the many reasons why our activity may take longer than we had planned.

So, ask yourself this: would you be willing to stand by a duration estimate that you have a 50% likelihood of hitting or one with a 90% likelihood? Obviously, we would prefer the 90% likelihood so we can maintain our professional reputation, but here's the catch: research by **Professor Eli Goldratt shows us that a 90% probability requires significantly longer estimates, *up to a 200% inflation in duration.***

That means that our Activity D, which we estimated should take five days to complete, is pitched to the boss as needing 15 days of effort. Remember that we aren't doing this to be capricious; we genuinely believe that our over-commitments and other external pressures will cause the schedule to slide.

Mistake two: The boss is human, after all

Adding safety to estimates isn't only a team member problem; bosses also feel the pressure of self-protection, not only for their own mistakes, but to cover themselves in the event that their teams get things wrong. So, consider a situation where a project administrator has three subordinates, each charged with estimating how long their individual activities are likely to take. For simplicity's sake, let's also assume that these three people each pass along estimates of five days to the boss.

When the boss aggregates these estimates, lo and behold! The number now being used for these three activities isn't 15 days, it's 20 days. Why? Well, don't forget that bosses are equally worried about their reputation and may not be willing to take their subordinates' estimates at face value. So, in the interest of self-preservation (there's that word, again), bosses do some massaging on their own, just to be safe. You see the irony here, don't you? Remember that the original set of estimates submitted by the subordinates are already built around inflated numbers, so this step is just adding safety on top of safety.

Mistake three: Factoring in anticipated cuts

In my consulting experience, I've seen multiple examples of what I can only call a curious take on how some of us attempt to motivate our staff. Best example: a senior manager who routinely shaved 20% off the project schedules given by his subordinates, thinking that this would 'inspire' them to find creative ways to work harder and smarter. Well, he got half his wish, because his subordinates certainly grasped the 'smarter' part of the equation. Think about this personally; imagine you had a boss who was notorious for shaving time off your estimates, how are you likely to respond? Probably in exactly the same way these people reacted – by simply adding in the expected 20% cut to their original estimate at the outset!

So, the activity that realistically should take three days to complete was increased to perhaps eight days to ensure a 90% likelihood of completion, with another layer of froth added by their boss for their own protection (let's assume two more days to get us up to 10 in total), and then, of course, we have to add an extra two days to counter-act the arbitrary 20% cut coming from the senior manager.

The result: it's not uncommon to find project activities that should take no more than two days being sent forward with an expected 12-day duration. This whole line of thinking was perfectly captured by a former project team engineer I knew who had become somewhat cynical after years of this sort of treatment, stating: "Since they don't take my estimates seriously, I've

stopped giving them serious estimates."

To recap, in many project organisations – especially those whose cultures tend toward self-preservation behaviour at the expense of team or project goal commitment – there is a real problem with trust. It's shown in the way that team members approach what should be relatively simple assignments like task duration estimation. What such behaviours say about these firms is telling and moreover, it leads to the obvious follow-on question: with such inflated estimates, how could any projects in these organisations ever be late? Well, as they like to say on television: stay tuned!

Wasting the time we worked so hard to find

So much effort and faulty assumptions are devoted to creative means for self-preservation, that it's a wonder that projects can be late. But they can be and often are – quite a bit late, in fact. This point brings us to consider how we got to this state: where does the time go? In offering my thoughts here, please bear in mind that these reasons are based on my own experiences with consulting, researching, and working in projects over the years. It's not an exhaustive list, nor are each of these reasons likely to resonate with all of us. However, I expect that you might realise and recognise one or two errors that you're prone to committing.

Reason one: The learning curve (aka the student term-paper syndrome)

Recalling your time at school or university, think back to when you received news in a new class that there would, by the end of term, be a large final assignment due in the form of an essay or report paper. If you're like me, that news meant rather little; an assignment not due for many weeks was hardly grounds for immediate concern. And so, time passed, we did little reflection, even less work, until we suddenly woke from our stupor, realised the paper was nearly due, and got working on it frantically, usually turning it in after two or three all-nighters fuelled by coffee and fear.

For many of us working on project teams, things aren't all that different. At the start of a project, we receive our assignments, usually a due date off somewhere in the future, and an admonition that we be sure to hit our target. And then? Well, just as with the student approach, other things are prompting our more immediate attention – other assignments due, juggling multiple projects, etc. So, faced with these other immediate expectations, the new assignment will have to wait its turn and sit in the inbox, in the face of a steady litany of 'where is it?' from our current team leaders on all those other project obligations we're dealing with. Think for a moment of an imaginary timeline stretching out, with a productivity curve atop. About halfway through the time allocated for completing the assignment, where are we actually in terms of productivity? Halfway done (which in the perfect world would be the case)? Partially done? Have we even started?

These are awkward questions, but they reveal a real truth about our commitments, time management skills, and ability to creatively problem solve under stressful conditions and time pressures. So much of that carefully collected activity safety isn't used to give us extra time on the project; it's used to give us extra time before the project!

Reason two: We don't pass along positive variance

Positive variance is defined as finishing an activity early – before the due date. This point raises an interesting and often embarrassing question: what do we do with positive variance? Suppose I bargain with my boss for a five-day window to complete my activity and actually finish in three days (I got lucky, other stakeholders misplaced my phone number, the stars aligned, I figured out a new method to achieve my results … you pick the reason). What do I do with those two extra days? Do I proudly present my boss with my work two days early? Some would think so, of course (I know I did when I first started out), but in many organisations you would be wrong. Think about why this is the case: you spent so much time bargaining for those five days and now you have just shown you didn't really need them. Do you think the boss won't remember this scenario the next time you have a negotiation for your duration estimate on the next project?

You: "I need five days."

The boss: "You got it done in three last time, so you only get three this time."

You: "But that was different!"

The boss: "Yes, it was different because this time, I'm not falling for it."

If we have even the slightest suspicion that the above conversation could take place in our own interactions with our boss, is it any wonder that it's much safer to turn in the work when promised – after five days?

Reason three: Multitasking

Multitasking is the reality of organisation life and is certainly the case for most of us working on projects. In informal conversations with project team members over the years, I have asked them how many projects they are currently supporting, and I can tell you that the numbers are usually scary, on average it's a range of somewhere between three and 14 projects that these folks are simultaneously supporting!

Imagine yourself in a situation where you are responsible for contributing your work to 14 projects at once. Different bosses, different priorities, different work methods, different schedules. Multitasking is common; it's also potentially dangerous to our ability to manage projects efficiently. Jumping from task to task is difficult and destroys our learning curve in getting familiar with the assignment. In addition to the coordinating challenges from changing tasks mid-stream, anecdotal evidence shows that switching attention between different activities results in a 50% longer time to finish those tasks, compared to focusing on one assignment through to completion before starting the next one.

I'm not suggesting that we abolish multitasking wherever possible, as most of our companies are resource-constrained so we are forced to attempt a number of activities with limited resources. It's important to be clear-eyed about this issue, because the more assignments I pile on my people and the more project activities I make them responsible for, the more fragmented their attention span. Have you ever watched jugglers?

Give them three balls to keep airborne and they look languid and in control, with minimal movement and a confident performance. Now, add six more balls and watch what happens. The measured and careful movements are replaced by a whirlwind of motion, with balls constantly in the air, landing just long enough to be popped up again. It's that way with juggling tasks: give me a couple and the work will get done purposefully. Keep tossing me new assignments and it gets to the point where I can't function (and the balls start dropping).

What's the message here?

I started this article by offering a 'modest proposal' when I suggested that no project should ever finish late. The reasons (three ways we routinely hunt for and inject safety in our duration estimates) seemed compelling and would suggest lots of extra time to get the work done. Unfortunately, we are just as adept at finding ways (some legitimate and some of our own making) to waste all that carefully accumulated time.

I can offer one important suggestion to resolving some of the problems with this strange dance we play with activity duration estimates, padding, and wasting time. I suggested that the root cause of many of these behaviours is the natural desire for self-preservation. So, the key to getting to the bottom of time-wasting behaviours is to eliminate that fear that is commonly felt when we are put in pressure situations, by working to minimise self-preservation through the honesty of authentic communication.

As you could probably determine in my earlier discussion, organisations that value and reward authenticity have a huge advantage over those that tacitly support a culture of self-preservation. We continue to pad estimates because, to some degree, we are reinforced to do so, either because it's in line with what others in the department do, because we don't trust our project manager, or colleagues have been publicly criticised in the past for missing deadlines (and we want to avoid our turn in the boss's crosshairs). In any of these situations, what is lacking is a fundamental level of trust in the boss and in the workplace.

Project leaders who support an authentic relationship with subordinates, insist on accurate estimates, and don't arbitrarily or capriciously punish delays (as long as the reasons are clearly understood) can foster an environment that moves away from the recurring problems of inauthentic behaviour, false estimation, and resulting time-wasting behaviours.

The question to first ask is simple: are we (team members and project administrators) prepared to mutually disarm in order to maximise our performance on our projects?

Author: Jeffrey K Pinto, PhD

Jeff is the Andrew Morrow and Elizabeth Lee Black Chair of Technology Management and Professor of Management at Penn State University, the Behrend College.

brought to you by FlameFront®

Further reading:

Goldratt, E. M. (2017). *Critical chain: A business novel*. Routledge.

Pinto, J.K. (2022), "No project should ever finish late (and why yours probably will, anyway)," *IEEE Engineering Management Review*, 50, 181-192.