

POWER GAMES

Graham Oakes delves into the murky world of project estimation.



Graham Oakes: estimation is often as much about power as predicatability

Why do we estimate? So we know how long the project will take, of course. The project manager needs to know when all the bright new features will be ready to release.

Why does the project manager need to know this? So they can get money from the sponsor, of course. Companies will only fund projects if they know exactly what they're going to get for their money, and when.

So if this is so obvious, why do companies continue to fund projects when the estimates so rarely give a fair indication of when the project will finish? It's a good question.

Estimation serves a host of rational purposes. It helps you allocate resources to the software projects that might deliver most 'bang for the buck'. It helps you make meaningful commitments to other people who are dependent on the outputs of your work.

Good estimation helps you scale and pace your development work – estimate too low, and you end up cutting corners; estimate too high, and work does indeed expand to fill the time available.

But that's not all there is to it. If estimation were purely a rational task, then organisations wouldn't tolerate the poor state of estimating in our industry.

They'd invest heavily to improve the way we estimate. They'd structure projects in ways that make effective estimation possible (eg, by moving in small iterations, and constantly recalibrating budgets and dates).

In reality, estimation is often as much about power as predictability. Organisational power often aligns to the amount of resource that you control.

This gives sponsors a big incentive to talk up their projects: if I have a bigger budget than you, then that's a clear indication that I'm more important than you. (I suspect many government mega-projects, for example, gain their size from this dynamic as much as anything.)

That dynamic operates similarly when managers deal with developers. If I can force you to make a smaller estimate, then that proves I'm more important than you. In effect, I've taken some days from you and put them into my pot.

If you're lucky, I'll call the pot 'contingency' and you may be allowed to draw from it if you need it. But I'm the one who controls the pot, not you.

Developers can play that game too. If we pad our estimates enough, then we have our own hidden pot of contingency. And so the game goes on.

Of course, it might also be the case that good estimation simply isn't possible. Prediction, as Yogi Berra said, is tough, especially about the future. But if good estimation isn't possible, why do we bother doing it at all?

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