

Estimating - Guestimating

Question:

Samoh, on my last few projects I have had a DOOZY of a time trying to estimate duration, hours of work, budget, you name it! With all those numbers working in my head, I just panic and write down the first thing that comes to my mind! My birthday was last week, and when someone asked how old I was, I got so frazzled that I yelled out "THREE THOUSAND", and ran out of the room. Please help me with some new techniques, or I'll be able to estimate the number of days I have left of employment: ZERO!!

Phillip

Answer:

Phillip

The first time you know the exact cost, effort and duration of a project is about 30 days after the project ends. Up until that time all we can do is guess. Yes, we want there to be some level of precision, but mostly they are guesses. Some of the new Agile techniques say that estimating on projects is useless. I would not go that far. There are a number of estimating tricks you can use to get managers off your back. If you told them your estimates were a guess, they would probably fire you on the spot. But if you make guesses and use some of the fancy words below for your reasoning, you should slip past their meddling eyes with no problem.

I'll let you in on five of my personal favorites.

Previous History

There is a small chance your company actually saves information about past project performance. That should not allow you to ask about the effort, cost and duration of projects that are similar to yours. When you are looking for prior projects, look for some that have names similar to your project names. Rhyming names are usually really close. Remember you are not trying to be scientific. You are just trying to get past the estimating police.

Analogy

The analogy technique means that you compare yourself to something similar. For example, I have a sign on my wall that says – "*Samoh is to Good Project Management as Up is to Down*". I am not sure exactly what these means but I have been told it is an analogy.

You can use analogies to estimate projects as well. This is a technique to use if you have similar projects but the prior projects did not track their effort, cost or duration (as was the case in the prior technique.) First try to find someone who has managed a similar project in the past. Ideally, you can dump the current project in their laps as well, but if not, at least you can get help. Take the estimates from the previous project and compare it to the actual results. For instance, let's say the prior project's estimation for effort was 5,000 hours and duration of nine months. They actually completed the project in nine months. In this case you could assume that the project effort was also around 5,000 hours.

By the way, if this is the case you should really try to get this project manager to take over your project for you.

Expert Opinion

There is no shame in asking for help. People ask me questions all the time since I have been around for so long. (I generally first laugh at them to show that their questions are so simplistic.) If you cannot find a good way to determine an estimate, consult an expert. This could mean going to an expert within your company or it could also mean consulting with an outside company that specializes in estimation/research. And if neither of these options suits you, I have often gotten help from the waiters at T.G.I. Fridays. They sure are smart!

Parametric Modeling

In this technique, you need to create a workable formula/algorithm that fits a known pattern. For instance, if you know that it takes five hours to train one person on a certain subject you can easily determine the amount of time it would take to train 50 people - 500 hours! No wait, it's ... carry the two, divide by hypotenuse... Well, you might need to write a software program to figure out the final estimate.

Flippus Coinium

My apologies to those of you who aren't fluent in Latin, but this technique translates to flipping a coin. Say you want to know how many hours a particular project is going to take. Flip a coin, and if it's heads it will take 100 hours and if it's tails it will take 500 hours. You might be asking how I came up with the numbers 100 and 500. Well that's simple - I flipped two coins previous to the final coin flip. And to come up with the four original numbers, I flipped four coins. You can obviously see the pattern here. If you have a lot of time, this one could be the right one for you.

Good luck Phillip. And be confident! Based on your question, I estimate you have at least another six months at this company before you start to update the ol' resume.