



Rose Coaching
Time Management
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www.RoseCoaching.info
LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info

The Secret Behind Accurate Estimating

By Laura Rose, CTACC

Certified Business and Personal Life Coach

Time is just a form of measurement. It's a tool for our convenience. One of the uses for "time" is to synchronize pieces of a project: to schedule the various work products and integrate into a quality product, service or event. Inaccurate estimating skills slow down the entire team and builds resentment in those required to pick-up the slack.

So – if time is just a form of measurement, why do we have trouble with our schedules and approximation?

Just like there are 12 inches in a foot, and 3 feet in a yard or 16 ounces in a pound, there are 60 seconds in an hour. We don't normally stress if we are given more material than we would like for a shirt, we simply measure and cut what we desire. We don't normally feel guilty when we cannot pour 8 pounds of sugar into a 5 pound sack. Why do we fret when we cannot fit our activities into the time allotted?

The simplistic answer is that, unlike measuring material or sugar, activities are less tangible and tactile. We can accurately guess how much 3 yards of material looks like. We can "eye-ball" what 5 pounds of sugar, wheat, or flour looks like. We are just not good at calculating what 1 hour of "activity" holds.

Some will argue that every task is different, so it's impossible to estimate how long something takes. That may be true if you only do a task one time and every task is so dramatically different it's impossible to interpolate from other similar tasks. This is not the case. Eight out of 10 cases, you will be doing similar things; therefore, you can log how long they are actually taking you. Once you take the time to log the actual time, you can better estimate for next time.

So, like anything else, accurate estimating takes some practice and logging your results.

The upcoming series will cover three methods of charting and logging your work product estimations:

1. Iterative charting to improve accuracy
2. Charting for effective communications
3. Charting for a streamlining process example

Tip: If you are a beginner in accurate estimating, the first thing is to experience what time actually feels like. Do the following test to see how accurate you are currently in-tune with time. If you feel your task will take 10 minutes, actually set your timer to 10 minute and start your task. Once the timer goes off, stop and actually see how much work you have left. If you were pretty close to finishing your task, you have a good feel for time. If you're not done, then we have some practicing to do. Now that you have a deliberately felt how long 10 minutes is, interpolate how long it will take you to complete the rest of the task. Repeat the exercise until you are better aligned with time, itself.

Charting and Logging:

Once you have calibrated your internal clock to be more aligned with actual time, let's start charting your estimating skills.

When starting, you will need to keep track of five things:

- The task
- Impact (who is waiting on it)
- Quality required
- Estimated time
- Actual time

Tasks	Impact	Quality	Estimated Time	Actual Time

Basic Recipe:

Tasks: We need to understand all the steps involved in this particular task.

Impact: Are there stakeholders involved, anything associated or connected with this task, is anyone waiting on it?

Quality: Does it require a high-level of quality to get to the next step?

Estimated time: time we think it will take

Actual time: time it actually took.

Tip: Major mistake most make is not logging the actual time it took versus the estimated time. Many will overwrite the planned with the actual time (or avoid writing the actual time altogether). The problem with this is that you cannot improve your skills if you don't know how much you are actually off.

Every time you do a significant task, log and track it. You need to actually time it as well to see how accurate your estimates are. Keep in mind the quality required to take it to the next step. For instance, if you want to give your graphic artist an idea of your concept, you don't need to write a 7 page white paper on it. A quick picture or diagram could effectively convey the concept in a matter of seconds. This may be enough for the other person to draft up some conceptual logos, sketches or graphics.

Conclusion:

The typical reason we are off on our estimates is that we don't really study how long things really take. We don't deliberately experience 10 minutes or 30 minutes. Therefore, we aren't really confident how much we can fit in that time slot. By attentively timing, logging and tracking our time on certain tasks, we will build a good foundation toward accurate estimations.

The next article will give additional techniques for logging and tracking our estimations. Remember, purposeful practice makes perfect.

One effective time management tip is to learn from other people's experiences. I have authored articles, books and videos on these topics. You can easily find these on my website at <http://eepurl.com/kc69P>

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