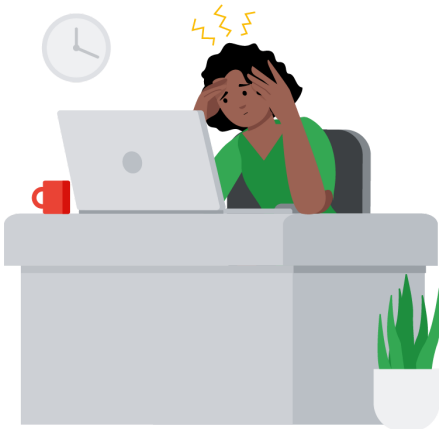


Case study: Run fast, pay later

Time estimation is used to predict the amount of time that will be required to complete a task. We have talked about how a central part of being a project manager involves planning. Carefully performing key steps of your planning process, such as time estimation, can have a big impact on the success of your project. Conversely, flawed time estimation is the root cause of many failed projects. That means many projects fail because project managers and teams fail to accurately estimate the time that it will take to complete tasks.

Let's discuss the following case study, which discusses how inaccurate time estimation can affect a project.

Run fast, pay later: A case study on time estimation



Kendra just scored a project manager role on a new project. It was a highly competitive bid, and the company and Kendra are eager to do a great job.

Kendra realized immediately that the timeline for the project would be almost impossible to execute. However, this was the first big project she was asked to manage. Therefore, instead of letting management know about the project’s impossible timeline, Kendra kept quiet and was determined to make it work. She rushed through the planning phase to get the team moving since time was ticking towards the project completion date. Kendra created all of the planning documents without input from her team or other stakeholders, with the sole intention of reaching the deadline. During the team meeting, Kendra presented her project plan to the team. Right away, team members expressed their concerns with the timeline. They felt like there wasn’t enough time to complete their work, and they worried that the timeline didn’t incorporate enough time for reviews. Kendra documented the team’s concerns, but instructed them to simply work faster and make it happen. As the project went on, the project faced schedule delays and other issues due to rework, previously unaccounted for tasks, stressed team members, and concerned stakeholders. Ultimately, the project missed its deadline. Later, the company did a retrospective to determine where things went wrong, and Kendra learned a lot of important lessons.

Analysis of the case study

Let’s break down the project planning process Kendra took and identify any missteps and corrective actions that would have helped set her team up for success.

Escalating concerns

Kendra sensed the project timeline was problematic right from the start of the project. Instead of gathering information to support her concerns and sharing it with management, she decided to keep the issue to herself. She moved faster towards the goal instead of slowing down and planning the project thoroughly.

Working carefully

If Kendra had taken the time to work carefully through the planning process, she may have been able to build a more realistic project plan to deliver the best product to the customer. She might also have identified potential time-saving activities that could have helped her team meet the project deadline. Thorough and careful planning with her team could have helped Kendra identify problems and solutions in advance, such as:

Elimination of tasks. It is possible that all of the tasks initially listed didn’t need to be completed. There may have been unnecessary work added in, and the team could have completed the project without it.

Increased team size. Kendra could have addressed the potential schedule risk by requesting more resources early on in the project rather than trying to execute without the necessary resources.

Streamlining of activities. There may have been some tasks that could have been done in parallel, or at least not in sequential order.

Gathering input from the team

Kendra should have brought together team members, peers, and management to help build and review her project plan, especially given the challenges of meeting the proposed project timeline. Kendra also didn’t take action to address the concerns of the team members who were responsible for completing the tasks within the estimated time.

In this case study, the project manager faced the repercussions of careless time estimates that resulted in rework and unplanned work. Most times, you can take a pain point in a project—like concerns about timelines—and turn it into an opportunity to be flexible and modify the plan to steer the project in a better direction.

Key takeaway

Be realistic when estimating time and effort for a project. Take the time to carefully evaluate potential risks and the impact on the work, and talk to your team members about these challenges. Don’t be afraid to escalate potential concerns to management. Optimism is a trait of a great project manager and leader, but it can adversely affect your projects when it comes to time estimation.

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