Mastering Projects Series

How to Sabotage a Project Schedule

A Student's Dilemma

Several years ago, one of my graduate students told me about a puzzling project schedule problem. He had been a project manager at a custom job shop. Because of his experience, he had a good idea of how long each new project should take. "After giving a quote where we barely completed the job on time, I added an additional safety margin of 20% on a similar job to make sure we wouldn't repeat that experience. We barely completed the second job on time as well. I increased the margin on the next quote by 33%. It was Déjà vu all over again."

This is a consistent theme on projects. No matter how much buffer is in a project schedule, it never seems to be enough. Why doesn't adding more buffer improve the odds of completing a project early or on time?

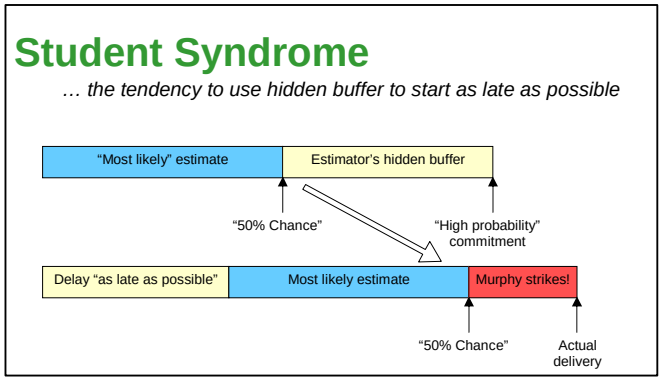
Padded Estimates

Dr. Elihu Goldratt thinks he knows part of the answer. He believes that project team members pad the time estimates that they publish for their tasks. As my student explained, "Everyone wants to be viewed as successful (or more pessimistically, avoid being singled out as the reason for failure)." Therefore, team members add some private buffer time to their "most likely" estimate, increasing their confidence that they will be able to overcome surprises and changes that confront them.

Unfortunately, the unintended side effects of this padding actually increase the likelihood of schedule problems because of two human behaviors known as *Student Syndrome* and *Parkinson's Law.*

Student Syndrome

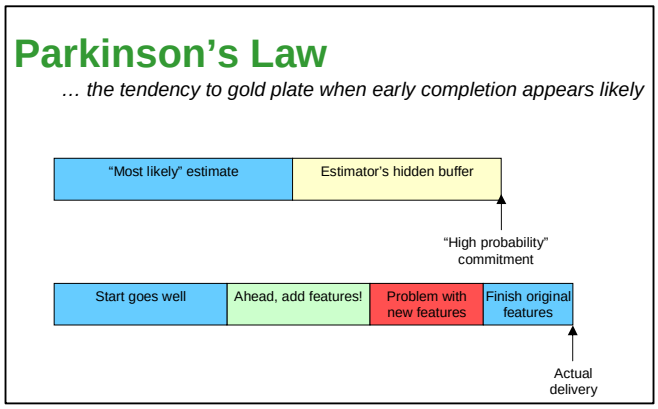
Student Syndrome is the tendency to start working on a task as late as possible. A busy person may delay starting a new task because he knows that there is hidden buffer. He uses up all or most of the buffer before he finally begins working on the task. With the buffer used up, the work must go perfectly in order to hit the agreed-on deadline. *At best*, the task will take as long as the original padded estimate. When Murphy pays a visit, the task will exceed what was supposed to be a high-confidence estimate.



Parkinson's Law

Parkinson's Law says that people who are ahead of schedule on a task will expand work to fill the available time instead of finishing early. Why? There are two seemingly innocuous reasons:

- Self-preservation: a team member doesn't want others to think he sandbagged (over padded) his estimate of how long the task would take, because that might encourage them to discount his estimates in the future.
- Desire to do a good job: team members use the "extra" time to improve the work beyond its original scope by adding a feature, doing extra testing, or other "good" additions. PMI calls this *gold plating*, and strongly discourages it.



More Padding Makes It Worse

Together, Student Syndrome and Parkinson's Law explain why many tasks finish late or barely on time, even though the "high probability" estimate was more than sufficient to do the originally scoped work. The result is exactly what my student described – projects miss schedules that should be easy. When those slips happen, our natural tendency is to add *more* buffer time to the next project so we don't get surprised again. Unfortunately, that can make the problem worse!

The more I watch myself, the more I see the insidious temptations of Student Syndrome and Parkinson's Law. In fact, I'm battling them now as I write this article. I got started late (Student Syndrome) and I'm tempted to spend more time adding details and further polishing my phrases (Parkinson's Law)!

Solutions

If this rings true for you and your project team, how can you combat it?

- Help your team members start each of their tasks as soon as possible. Even if they don't complete them right away, they can get far enough to reduce some of the risk and uncertainty.
- Estimate as accurately as possible during planning. Explicitly examine any buffers that you add to manage uncertainty. Be aware that adding hidden buffers to each task can make things worse.
- Use risk management as an alternative to blindly increasing schedule pad. When you create and act on proactive risk plans, you reduce uncertainty and increase potential schedule upside. Help your project team be prepared to take advantage of upside of when it happens.

- When tasks go well, seize the opportunity to get ahead of schedule. Although gold plating may seem to improve quality, it actually jeopardizes your best chances to complete the project in the timeframe needed by your company and its customers.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to see an editor about submitting an article that is behind schedule!

About the Author

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