



Onageristic* Estimates for IT Projects



*An Onager is a wild ass found in Central Asia. So an Onageristic Estimate is a "wild ass guess."

Much has been written about the science of estimating. The task of estimating for technology projects is part science, part instinct, part alchemy and all mysterious. There are standards and benchmarks for lines of code, variables multipliers, and other exotica. This is good stuff and certainly makes for a good place to start. But still, IT Project Managers often feel like turning to the dartboard. Are we actually doing anything more than guessing? We often forget that a "guess" by an experienced Project Manager is pretty educated in relation to the layperson.

We're not like construction companies after all. They meet their estimates all the time. Well, except for the weather, of course. Or materials problems, or trucking problems, or Union problems. And don't forget locusts, frogs, etc. At least on IT Projects we don't have weather or other

acts of nature. Oh, except for that one time our equipment was delayed by a storm. Or when the raccoon ate through the main network cable. Let's face it...estimating can bring chills up our spines!

We Project Managers are people after all, and people like to succeed. So, all of the places where we have not succeeded in the past lay in wait for us as lessons. This goldmine of lessons most likely resides in your subconscious and it helps to bring it gently to the forefront.

Here are some estimating dimensions that may be in your own mix of instinctual, gut-feeling, guessing:

History: in previous projects you may have had an area where you've consistently blown your estimate, so over time, you learn to make it plenty large.

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Players: you have a good sense of the skill levels of the players on your project. Will any require a learning ramp-up period? Many? Are they experienced with projects? With the subject matter? With any of the tools?

Credibility: how much can you trust the estimates of the various members of the project team? Are there eternal optimists or pessimists among them? Is anyone using the word "hope"?

The Team: you've seen this bunch work together before...or not. Are there any egos that will require discussion/decision-making overhead? Do you see them as stable, likely to stay on board, or are there a few who have been wearing interview suits lately?

The Number of Stakeholders: the more stakeholders, the more meetings, conversations, coordination, etc. And this is an estimating area that increases geometrically.

The Mix of Stakeholders: not necessarily related to numbers, but if you have two or more stakeholders that hold basically differing opinions on simple subjects, decision-making overhead will expand significantly. Do you need to work your way through Headquarters versus Field views of the project requirements?

Newness: you know in your heart that there is a critical mass of "new" things related to this project. A new programming language, new version control tools, testing process, database tool, etc. Each new aspect = more time needed.

Geography: where are your project team members located? Your end users? Stakeholders? Is anyone offshore? Even with all the modern communication tools, some face time is mandatory to keep the team glued together.

Business Cycles: you may be able to finish the system by December, but if that is your busy business/program time of year, you may not have the

time for people to train on the new system.

Political Hot Potatoes: maybe no one talks about it, but you know there are people out there in the bushes who are just waiting for this project to become visible so they can bring up their favorite gripe to create time-hogging controversy. Or perhaps there are Union-sensitive elements to this project. Are people's working conditions going to change? Any jobs to be "saved" by the automation?

Well, ok, the Weather: do people vital to the project need to drive over mountain passes in the winter? Do you have the budget to fly them?

The Plate: do you have a dedicated project team? Or is the project something they are supposed to be doing in addition to their regular operational duties? Can you really expect 50% of their time?

Oversight: are there external players from whom you must obtain permission at various milestones? You might need to build in "wait time," during which you can go on to other things, but run the risk of rework if there are strings tied to the permission.

Add-your-own: each Project Manager has pet items that influence their estimating. We don't talk about them because they may have to do with animal entrails or astronomy or what was spelled out in our alphabet soup, but we know we can trust them.

So, my advice is to go fearlessly into the estimating arena trusting your inner Onager. With your gut learning to guide you, most likely you will not repeat mistakes of the past, just make new ones. There are always new lessons to learn! 🐺

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