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Agile Mentor February 2010

Agile Dad

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February 2010

Agile Mentor
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This Certified Scrum Trainer's experience spans a broad array of technical software production roles and responsibilities. Lee has worked hands on as a GUI web developer, quality assurance analyst, automated test engineer, senior product manager, senior project manager, ScrumMaster, agile coach, consultant, and ADDIE training professional. He has worked with hundreds of teams to assist them in successful implementation of thousands of projects. His client list includes Fortune 500 companies, Government sector projects, small and large software production facilities, and multiple successful large scale e-commerce implementations.

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Exactimation or Estimation?

Sometimes I find myself in the camp of those who come out swinging when it comes to certain Agile topics. Estimation is and always has been a big deal to me! For those of you unaware of my psychology background, I often find myself spending time observing the behaviors of people on the Agile team. One thing I have observed time and time again is case and point and appears to be taken directly from a Mike Cohn classic. Intelligent people flounder when it comes to estimation accuracy using time!

Did I just say that? It seems to me that once a person's IQ hits a set magic number, their ability to conceptually keep track of time along with their ability to maintain an internal clock seep away as additional hard knowledge enters. I have done a number of exercises including a lap around the room, drinking a cup of water, saying the ABC's, and countless others. All I have learned is that people who are really intelligent have zero concept of time.

On the bright side, one thing they are exceptionally good at is estimating size, scope, and or complexity of any item, project, or product. This is exactly where the planning poker game picks up. Using a modified fibonacci scale, we can quickly address items in terms of size, scope, and or complexity. The intent of the game is to drive forward conversation at the last responsible time.

Unfortunately, it has been written that a solid release planning meeting for a quarterly release cycle with an average size project could take as much as 2-3 days. This to me is shocking at best. I have always had a hard time believing that this could really take so long. That is, until I sat in on my very first planning poker session.

The meeting was release planning. The team was trying to be responsible and behave that way by looking ahead at features / stories that were planned for the upcoming release. The product owner stepped up without regard to time, (no time-boxing here), and began the rundown on the first item up for bid. After a long-winded well intended 10 – 12 minutes, the team was ready to vote on the first item. The deck came out and the bids were similar, but there were two outliers. The team spent the next 15 minutes hearing the opinions of the outliers then were asked to vote again. There was still no consensus, so the team voted a third time. After thirty minutes, item one of four hundred thirteen had been estimated.

Much of the banter surrounded scope depending on who the bell tolled for, (who would be doing the work). Other banter included resource allocation, etc.

this issue

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Agile Dad



The Sizing Scale

Now that you have read about a revolutionary new way to size items and conduct a more meaningful release planning, all that remains is to discuss the scope of the scale and make certain the understanding is that we are NOT doing away with numbers! In fact, we are still using the same planning poker scale we have always used:

XS = one point

SM = two points

MD = three points

LG = five points

XL = eight points

Items larger than extra large should be treated as epics and be broken down prior to working on them. Items smaller than extra small should most likely be considered tasks and treated at the task level. This sizing scale helps teams determine relative size and complexity by taking the time to find the universal small backlog item or story. The conversation surrounding the few that are disparate is limited in scope to only ten minutes max per item. At the end of the day, the teams estimate stands tall since they are the ones doing the actual work!



Cont: Exactimation or Estimation?

"Meetings should be short, enjoyable, and well attended. If not, you are doing the meeting incorrectly!"

– V. Lee Henson CST

We even had one discussion about task level details regarding an item that was potentially three months away from delivery. What I witnessed could have been shrugged off as terrible planning, but I looked at this as an opportunity.

I am of the opinion that all meetings can stand some form of improvement. (See all of my sessions regarding enhanced meeting facilitation) This meeting just needed a major tune-up. Just as you would see in an episode of Super Nanny, I had completed my observation and formulated a plan for the team to gain some footing. I started by resolving to the fact that the team would have a chance to see each of these items at least once more during sprint planning. I also determined that during release planning, an estimate should be good enough, yet all I heard were people striving to give an exact.

I had ideas of what I needed to do, the next step was to sell it to the product owner and team.

We do still need to stay focused on complexity and size as opposed to time. The burning question became at a release planning level, how close is close enough? How detailed do our estimates need to be? Can we still be successful if our estimates are just close enough?

I found a way to put this to the test. I started with the product owners and I conducted an exercise using t-shirts to help them understand relative sizing. T-shirts were perfect as they have many sizes available.

I asked the product owners to take the items in their backlog and instead of focusing on time based completion, to associate a T-shirt size to each item making it relative to other t-shirts in their backlog. Although at first they felt the exercise was silly, they played along and quickly discovered that this technique was much easier than the traditional time based estimation process. I had them do this for an entire release.

Once they completed the exercise, I had them conceal their estimates from the group and enter the planning room with their estimates already completed. Now that they had their estimates, it was time to ask the team for theirs. I needed to find a way to make this engaging, fun, and take much less time than traditional release planning. I also wanted to incorporate the poker metaphor somehow.

"The team's estimate ultimately wins every time as they are doing the work."

– V. Lee Henson CST

I invited the team in and explained that I had printed out all of the story cards for the entire next release.

I then invited the team to gather in close around a large round table. I walked in shaking a large clean waste basket filled with their backlog items. The shaking added to the fun and the wastebasket gave a certain visual impression that the effort I was looking for was much less than they were traditionally used to providing. It was then time for me to explain the rules of the game to the team.

I placed the wastebasket upside down on the table concealing all of the cards contained inside and alerted the team to listen closely. I explained that I was about to lift the basket. When I did, the team had thirty seconds to find an item they could all agree was small in scope. I then lifted the basket and watched the fun unfold. The team really rushed to find an item that they considered small in scope and marked it with a large red 'S'. They proclaimed to me that they all agreed that this item was indeed small. On a very large white board behind them, I had columns for small, medium, and large.

I then informed the team they would have nine minutes and thirty seconds to take the remaining items and tape them to the board in their correct columns. The only rule was the giant S item always remained small. Anyone was allowed to move any item, even if it was on the board, as long as it was not the 'S' item. The team was quick to ask, what if we have an item that is larger than large? I explained XL to them. The same was true for XS. Remember, these are t-shirt size estimates. Once the team completed their estimates in record time, I excused them to go lunch.

It was then time for the product owners to do a comparison. If there was only one degree of separation in the initial estimate, the teams estimate stayed and was sufficient. More than one degree of difference required time-boxed conversation. Out of several hundred items, less than ten required additional conversation. This sped up the meeting to a little over an hour and everyone was happy about that! More info on sizing scale in the left column.



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For more information or to book a course today, please contact:

Lee Henson – 801-898-0295
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This Month's Agile Q&A

Q: Will you be presenting at AgilePalooza in Atlanta, GA?

A: Yes I am! Please keep your eyes at the website <http://www.agilepalooza.com> for additional details on both of the sessions I will be presenting at. Follow the proceedings on Twitter.

Q: What can we be looking for in March?

A: In March we will dive into the Agile Marsupial and talk a little more about technical debt. Be on the lookout for more information!

