

## Relative Estimation in Agile Project Management<sup>1</sup>

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As they say that life is a journey and most (if not all) value should be derived while you are traveling (or alive).

I want to propose a similar perspective of *relative estimation* in Agile Project Management. Many times (if not most), the relative estimation is viewed and conducted as if it is a sprint task by itself, barely touching upon the productive side of this journey. If it is performed as a journey to understand the requirements clearly, be creative and bring collective wisdom and knowledge into solution design, and align on optimal solution efficiently, then a couple of hours spent on estimation each sprint would not feel a waste of time. In fact, the time spent on this journey could be the most value adding time of team's calendar.

As part of many years of Agile coaching and project management, I have come across so many well-intentioned people with valid question - "Why do we need to do estimation?"

Let me give a not-so-simple answer - Why does the Sun need to shine if we were to get the rain?

My sincere apology - I know that it is rude and unprofessional to answer a question with a question but sometimes a pointed question may prod us to find answers within, which is way better than the answers we seek outside. The answers that one finds within come with inherent peace and self-biased acceptance. That may not always be true of the answers we seek from outside.

Philosophy aside, let me connect the dots of this analogy. Just like how the Sun activates the process of evaporation and hence we (or someone somewhere) would get rain, the estimation process activates the process of better understanding and associating and refining, and clarifying and aligning to the requirements so that we (or some customer somewhere) would get the intended value of our product/service.

So how do we bring this new perspective to fruition?

Typically, I recommend three aspects of requirements (user story) to be considered - Doubt, Difficulty, and Duration. These 3Ds provide a good structure to evaluate a particular user story to the base user story. If the team does not have clarity in understanding the user story, the estimate should tilt to higher side. If team is venturing into a new area of development or working with new technology or working with multiple internal and external dependencies,

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<sup>1</sup> How to cite this article: Mundra, A. (2018). Relative Estimation in Agile Project Management, *PM World Journal*, Vol. VII, Issue XI - November.

then the user story should be estimated as bigger for the reason of difficulty. The third D brings in the experience into play that development of certain types take little or greater efforts and the user story can be estimated accordingly.

This structure of 3D is neither comprehensive nor was it meant to be but provides a simple, non-jargonized way of evaluating the user stories and sizing them to develop a guideline on time.

Here is a summary of the benefits of (Relative) Estimation in Agile Framework:

- Common understanding of the Requirements – We have all seen the pictorial satire of a tire-as-a-swing (TAAS?) on the tree-branch on how requirements can be misunderstood by different people in the team. Having a common understanding of requirements reduces the possibility of wasted efforts and heartburn of delivering a half-baked, ill-tested and poorly-operationalized product to the customer. It also acts as the foundation of solution design process.
- Collective wisdom – When the requirements are looked at by entire team together, they will benefit from team’s collective creativity and knowledge. This enrichment/enhancement bakes requirements and solution to optimal end-result.
- Alignment on common solution – Many times, a single requirement can be met by more than one solution. If team members are thinking of different solution to the requirements, the process of relative estimation will expose those differences. This process allows the knowledge and experience to leverage the re-usability of some modular codes rather than writing everything afresh.
- Team’s glue – The process of refinement/enhancement/clarification/ alignment brings a team closer to the requirements and closer to each other as team members. This is very important for building great products and services, and for capturing the essence of product/business people’s ideas. High visibility, mission-critical and quick turnaround types of projects need this kind of association even more.

Helping teams understand the context of this estimation journey and its value is key for its success.

I know, I could have given a simple answer (which is a quote of a senior leader in the industry) – “When we would not hire a contractor to build the custom deck behind our house without contractor giving us a timeline then why should we expect that a product/business person would keep funding development teams without a timeline?”

But then, simple answers are so preachy and lack the adventure.

## About the Author



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**Arvind Mundra** has been working Agile Project Management for last 20 years in various roles. After spending 6 years as C++ developer, Arvind became interested in aligning project management to the maximum value creation from a software development team's work. For last many years, Arvind has focused on training software development teams on Agile Project Management and coaching them to build the self-sustaining discipline.

Arvind has gone through multiple certifications from both PMI and Scrum Alliance and has contributed to the pilot program of PMI-ACP certification and has been active in local Agile user groups.

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