



White paper

## **It'll never take that long**

Be careful when bidding projects

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Scoutwest, Inc.

## It'll never take that long

Have you ever worked on a project where you can't quite see how everything is going to get done in the timeframe allotted? Things seem to be moving so slowly, and there just seems like a lot to do? Your gut tells you that something is wrong. You might be tempted to say, "At this rate we won't finish until next year." A statement like that is likely to be greeted with something like, "It'll never take that long", accompanied by an odd glance questioning your ability to execute. Everyone begins to assume that you're the only one who'll be late because you are the only one talking about tripling the schedule. It can be a career-limiting-move (CLM). Watch yourself.

This issue can pose a big problem for independent contractors. Let's suppose that you make an honest assessment of the project, and forecast a one-year development cycle. If your boss thinks it will only take six months, he'll hire somebody else to do the job. That other person will probably take a year or more to complete the work, but he got the job and you didn't. Nobody ever looks back and realizes that you were right in the first place. They just think you were nuts. The dilemma: if you tell the truth you don't get the job, if you lie, you get the job but look bad because it took longer than you said it would. So what's the answer?

First, do your homework. Make absolutely sure you have studied the issues well, have a clear set of requirements that are nearly written in stone, and know every detail about the problem you are solving. Don't throw out a ship date until you know what you are talking about. Make sure you can confidently defend your analysis. Don't use excessive sandbagging. Instead, provide excessive detail, rolled up in tidy summaries. The more detail you provide, the easier it is to justify. It also shows that you know what you are talking about. It makes you look smarter than the guy who just throws out a date that is six months earlier than yours, because you studied and he didn't.

Consider offering plus and minus percentage factors of error that tighten up as the project proceeds. This allows you to sheepishly offer the possibility that the project won't take as long as your gut tells you it will. Break the project into phases that each have percentage factors associated with them. When each phase is complete, and more knowledge is gained, the percentage factors for subsequent phases tighten up.

Write your analysis out on paper, regardless of the perceived size of the project. The act of putting your thoughts on paper has the amazing effect of clarifying them, and posing new ones. And again, it always makes you look smarter.

Use Microsoft Project as an adding machine. Enter as many tasks as you can think of. Task durations will roll up to the summary and project level, giving you a pretty good assessment of the job. Tasks should be taken directly from your requirements and design documents, and durations should be expressed in hours. The final analysis should take under consideration that people typically work only five to six hours per day on tasks, whereas the rest of the day is spent on overhead items.

Make sure your analysis is easy to present and absorb. Speak with quiet confidence, and make sure your boss understands the details and why they are important to your outlandish worst-case scenario. It won't look so strange when the details are understood. Make sure your boss knows that you know that the devil is in the details.

Bottom line: when you propose a project schedule, make sure you speak with a small voice but carry a big stick. Don't commit an unnecessary CLM.

## About Us

Scoutwest, Inc. develops and publishes project management and time tracking products for consulting, manufacturing, government, and general business applications.

Thousands of small to large businesses, in dozens of countries worldwide, trust their mission critical business processes to Scoutwest products. Standard Time® and Standard Issue® work together to offer well-rounded project management solutions.

We specialize in packaged software for timesheets, project management, time tracking, defect tracking, and issue tracking. Standard Time is a web-based timesheet that also runs on Windows, Palm OS, and Pocket PC. It can be used for client billing and task management. Standard Issue is used for bug tracking and general issue tracking.

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