

## ***The Planning Game – An Estimation Method for Agile Teams***

AgileAdvice.com: <http://bit.ly/Nb72hs>

There are actually many minor variations in how to use “Planning Poker” cards for team estimation of work. The method I have described below is a specific variation that I have developed based on my understanding of the need for safety for teams. This idea of safety is very strongly articulated in both Scrum and the Crystal family of methods and is a pre-condition for effective self-organization. In many organizations, estimation is some of the most stressful and unsafe work there is. People are held accountable for supposed commitments that were really just rough estimates. This approach to Planning Poker helps team members by reducing the stress of individual accountability and instead focussing on team accountability.

**Purpose:** estimate the effort for User Stories (Product Backlog Items, Value Drivers)

Prerequisites: all items have a value estimate, each item is written on a separate note card, full team membership is known and available for planning, each team member has a set of planning game cards

**Process:**

1. The team goes through all the items and chooses the one which has the lowest effort. Write the number “2” on this card (usually in the bottom right corner). This step can involve some discussion, but is usually fairly quick. The “smallest” effort item is often quite obvious. If it's not obvious, take some time, but the team shouldn't worry about getting this exactly right.
2. The team looks at the item with the highest value.
3. Each team member thinks about how much effort the team will expend to fully complete all the work for the item. Comparing this work to the work effort for the smallest item, each team member selects a card that represents this relative effort. For example, if you think that it requires ten times the effort, you would select the “20” card. It is not permissible to select two cards.
4. Each team member places their selected card, face down, on the table. Once all team members have done this, turn the cards over.
5. If all team members show the same value, then write the value on the item and go back to step three for the next item. (Or if there are no more items, then the process is complete.)
6. The person with the highest and the lowest value cards both briefly explain why they voted the way they did. If there is a Product Owner present, this person can add any clarifications about the item.

NOTE: For any given item, if a person is highest or lowest more than once, then each explanation must include new information or reasoning. It is not permissible to repeat a reason for voting!

7. Once explanations are complete, the team members collect their cards and go back to step three.

**Notes:**

- it is extremely important that the voting for an item continues until all team members unanimously vote the same way (this way team members and outside stakeholders cannot

blame any individual for “wrong” estimates)

- in Scrum, it is normal for the Product Owner to be present during this process, but not to participate in the voting
- voting should not include extensive discussion – instead the emphasis is on multiple rapid voting cycles
- if more than one person has the lowest or highest vote, usually just one person shares their reason in order to help the process move quickly
- the first few items will often take 10 or 15 rounds of voting before the team arrives at a unanimous vote
- later on, items may take just one or two rounds of voting to arrive at a unanimous decision
- some teams, where trust levels are high, will discard with the use of physical cards and just briefly discuss votes

The planning game is used at the start of a project with the full list of user stories. In this case, it is reasonable to expect the team to average two minutes per user story, and an appropriate amount of time needs to be set aside to accommodate going through the whole list.

The Planning Game is also used any time that there is a change in the list of user stories: re-ordering, adding or removing user stories, or changes to a single user story. When such a change happens, the team can re-estimate any user story in the whole list. When starting a Cycle or Sprint or Iteration, all the user stories in the list should have up-to-date estimates so that estimation work is avoided in the Cycle planning meeting.

Finally, the team can decide to re-estimate any user stories at any time for any reason. However, it is important for team members to remember that estimation is non-value-added work and the time spent on it should be minimized.



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