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HSG CONSULTING, LLC
Providing Quality and Experienced Project Management Methods

Welcome to the November/December newsletter for HSG Consulting

Welcome to the November/December newsletter. Given the busyness of the holiday season a combined newsletter just sounded like a good idea.
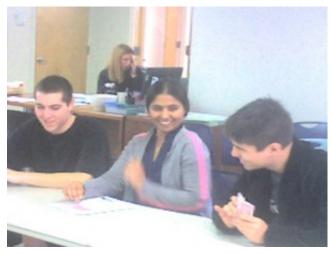
Occasionally I run across some great project management tools or ideas that I'd like to share with you. Somewhere between a blog and formal article, this is meant to be conversational, helpful, and inspire feedback. I hope you enjoy it.

In This Issue
- What is Planning Poker and How Can You Use It?
- Who is HSG Consulting?
- Planning Poker Online

Click to visit my website

What is Planning Poker and How Can You Use It?

Planning Poker is a tool used in Agile projects to gather estimates from your development team. We know from experience that getting estimates from our team members can be a daunting task. For a variety of reasons we may find resistance to estimation, or estimates that are so heavily padded to cover the unknowns that our discussions around what can be done when feel like walks through the La Brea tar pits.

Planning Poker is a technique to help our teams gain more comfort in estimating user stories. It gathers estimates from every developer individually, not just the more vocal ones in a group setting. It enables communication about the user story, and fosters continued discussion to understand the scope and complexity of the user story.

How?

The standard Planning Poker uses story points rather than duration or effort estimates. There is a lot of good information around story points on the internet. Follow the 'more information' link to one of them from Mike Cohn.

Do you HAVE to use story points to get the benefits of planning poker?

No.

For new Agile teams I've worked with we've estimated in hours of effort. This helped the team by using something they were already comfortable with in a new way.

Try this, get a deck of playing cards. Pull out the Ace, Two, Four, Eight, Jack, and King from each suit. Separate each suit, so you have 4 decks of 6 cards each. Give 4 team members a deck of cards. Repeat as needed to give every team member a deck of cards.

The Ace represents 1 hour of effort. The Two, Four, Eight represents 2, 4 and 8 hours of effort, respectively. The Jack represents 16 hours, and the King represents 'Holy Cow, I have no idea'.

Each member holds their cards close to their chest during estimation. The user story is then read aloud by the Project Manager to the team. The team briefly discusses what is included in the user story - such as: 'remember unit tests and integration tests are included in this story, plus QA's FitNesse tests.' The team may then discuss at a high level how they would implement the code for the user story. The Project Manager (or ScrumMaster) needs to keep this discussion brief enough to allow time to estiamte all the outstanding user stories likely for the next iteration.

Each team member then selects their own Planning Poker card to represent what they feel would take to implement the code for the user story, but they don't show it to anyone yet. When directed from the Project Manager, all members show their cards at once.

Usually there will be discrepancies in the estimates. From here the Project Manager leads the team to review what they felt the user story included, or did not, and uncover different assumptions. The Project Manager works with the team to identify a common understanding of the task at hand, and agree upon a single estimate for the user story.

The picture above shows a team of developers using the Planning Poker method to estimate their outstanding user stories. This was the first time the team used this method, and you can see that they were clearly having fun with it! I encourage you to try this with your teams. And if you want more help with this, call me! I'd be glad to help guide your teams with their Agile adoption.

Click here for more information on Story Points

Who is HSG Consulting?

HSG Consulting has been helping clients refocus their teams, regain direction of their projects, and put thier Agile adoption back on track. If you're worried that you are slipping back into your old methods and experiencing missed Sprints, waste in unfinished work, and not getting the right things done for the right projects, **contact me for a free 1 hour review** of your project issues. We can get started on jump starting your Agile teams.

Click to access my 'Contact Us' page

Planning Poker Online

For distributed teams you can try using Mike Cohn's Planning Poker online tool. It uses Story Points and is completely free. Click here to access the site and give it a try.

Having trouble planning your Sprints? Register for my **Scrum Planning workshop**. It is an energetic two-day workshop involving structured brainstorming and idea refinement in small groups. This workshop does not consist of artificial made-up exercises. Following completion of the workshop, your team will be united in its outlook and motivated to proceed; you will have a clear understanding of the benefits, success criteria, risks, obstacles and hidden assumptions associated with your project; and you will have a breakdown of the key tasks for launching it.

Click here to learn more.

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