

A Better Approach for Backlog Work Item Story Point Estimation



Story pointing backlog work items **based on relative complexity (difficulty) only** is overly complex and slows the onboarding of new associates and key stakeholders, thus wasting valuable resource time.

There... I “said” it!

The good news is I am going to suggest a better approach that helps teams achieve the same desired objectives, which is:

1. To understand how long the work should take and what it should cost as it pertains to effort
2. To trigger a discussion when estimates vary significantly between estimators, so all known challenges are uncovered, and a unified understanding can be reached

Perhaps a better approach is to estimate a work item’s points using the context of build and test workdays instead of relative complexity. Through my experience, I have found this approach is easy for almost anyone to understand, and with greater ease of understanding the estimation points will have more value throughout the entire project lifecycle.

An additional benefit of this approach is it will be much easier to determine which work items can be pulled in when a backfill opportunity exists. For example, if a product owner knows the team now has two open days of capacity in the current Sprint, they can then look at the backlog and the points estimate to find a work item with “2” points and be confident the work can be pulled in and completed within two days.

This same concept should be applied at the Epic and Feature level to establish acceptable lead time budgets for all work.

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The lead time point estimates at the Epic and Feature level will be much higher, but they serve as a great guide for those responsible for engineering a solution.

When you know how much time you have as a budget, engineering the right solution early on becomes much easier, and having to redo your design because it had too many “shiny” things is mitigated. A lead time budget in points at the Epic and Feature level can also help control scope creep.