Story points and planning poker: how agile estimation actually works

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Story points are a relative measure of the effort, complexity and uncertainty in a piece of work. They are not part of the Scrum Guide; they are a common practice teams add. Used well, they speed up planning conversations. Used badly, they become a performance metric that everyone learns to game.

TL;DR The short version

- Story points are a relative measure of effort, complexity and uncertainty; they are a common practice, not part of the Scrum Guide.
- Planning poker reveals private estimates together, and the discussion between a 2 and a 13 is worth more than the number.
- Never compare points between teams or convert them back into hours.

Read online, listen to it, or change the text size: https://blogs.iictp.org/story-points-and-planning-poker

Why relative, not hours

People are poor at estimating absolute time but fairly good at comparing: "this is about twice as big as that". Points capture that comparison and stay stable as a team gets faster, whereas hour estimates drift.

How to start

1. Pick a small, well-understood item the whole team knows and call it 2 or 3 points.
2. Estimate other items relative to it.
3. Use a coarse scale, often a modified Fibonacci sequence: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13. The gaps widen because uncertainty grows with size.
4. Anything above the top of your normal range should be split, not estimated.

Planning poker

1. The Product Owner explains the item and answers questions.
2. Each developer picks a card privately.
3. Everyone reveals at once, which stops anchoring on the first voice.
4. The highest and lowest explain their reasoning.
5. Re-vote once or twice; then take the consensus or the larger number and move on.

The real value

The discussion after a 2 and a 13 are revealed together is worth more than the number. It surfaces a hidden assumption, a forgotten migration or a simpler approach.

Mistakes to avoid

- Comparing points between teams. Each team’s scale is its own.
- Converting points back into hours or days.
- Rewarding people or teams for more points. Inflation follows immediately.
- Spending more time estimating than the precision is worth.

Alternatives

Some teams drop estimates and split all items to roughly the same size, then count items. Others use T-shirt sizes for long-range planning. Pick what helps the team plan; the method matters less than the conversation.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Schwaber, K. and Sutherland, J. (2020). The Scrum Guide. scrumguides.org.
2. IICTP. TPBOK, Engineering Governance & Agile Delivery. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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