Technical debt: how to measure it, price it and persuade leadership

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Technical debt is the future cost of shortcuts taken today. It is not always bad: like financial debt, it can buy speed. The problem is unmanaged debt that nobody has priced.

TL;DR The short version

- Technical debt is the future cost of today's shortcuts; it can buy speed, but unmanaged and unpriced debt is the problem.
- Make it visible and price it in terms managers care about: days lost, incidents caused, features delayed and risk.
- Persuade with the cost of leaving it, propose small specific fixes, and pay it down steadily in the code you already touch.

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Make it visible

- Keep a list of known debt, with the area and the pain it causes.
- Record where the team loses time: slow builds, fragile modules, repeated incidents.
- Link each item to a cost: delay, risk or both.

Price it

Express debt in terms a manager cares about: days lost per month, incidents caused, features delayed, risk of a serious failure. Estimates are rough, and that is acceptable as long as you say so.

Persuade

1. Show the cost of leaving it, not the beauty of fixing it.
2. Propose a small, specific change with a clear benefit.
3. Tie it to a goal leadership already has.
4. Report the result afterwards.

Pay it down steadily

Reserve a regular share of capacity and fix debt in the code you are already changing. Avoid the big rewrite unless the case is overwhelming and the plan is incremental.

Related credential: Certified Technical Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. Cunningham, W. “The WyCash Portfolio Management System.” OOPSLA 1992.

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