Velocity and burndown charts: how to read them, and how not to use them

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Velocity and burndown charts are two of the most common agile charts. Neither appears in the Scrum Guide; both are practices teams adopt to see progress. They are useful for the team's own forecasting and harmful the moment they become targets.

TL;DR The short version

- Velocity and burndown charts help a team forecast its own work, and neither appears in the Scrum Guide.
- A burndown plots remaining work against days; a burnup also shows when scope grows.
- They become harmful as targets or team comparisons, so pair them with cycle time, throughput and DORA metrics.

Read online, listen to it, or change the text size: https://blogs.iictp.org/velocity-and-burndown-charts

Velocity

Velocity is the amount of work a team finishes in a Sprint, usually counted in story points or completed items. Only work that meets the Definition of Done counts. Take an average of the last three to five Sprints to forecast how much fits in the next one or roughly when a release may land.

Burndown charts

- A Sprint burndown plots work remaining against days in the Sprint. The ideal line runs from the total to zero.
- Above the line: behind. A flat stretch often means work is in progress but nothing is finishing.
- A sudden drop at the end usually means items were closed in a batch, or that "done" was relaxed.
- A line that goes up means scope was added.

Burnup charts

A burnup chart plots completed work and total scope as two lines. It makes scope changes visible, which a burndown hides, so it is often better for release tracking and stakeholder conversations.

How not to use them

- As a target: "raise velocity by 20%" leads to inflated estimates, not more value.
- To compare teams: each team's points mean something different.

- To judge individuals.
- As the only measure. A team can have stable velocity while quality falls.

Better companions

Flow measures such as cycle time and throughput, and delivery measures such as the DORA metrics, show speed and stability together. Bring one chart to the Retrospective and ask what explains it. See also earned value management for the project-management view of progress.

> 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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