

The Estimation Gap

A Case Study in Padding Your Calendar Honestly

TIME AFFLUENCE

October 1, 2026

The Setup

Consider a month of real, ordinary work: eight recurring tasks, the kind that show up on most calendars without much thought given to how long they actually take. A quarterly report. A round of client emails. A presentation deck. Nothing dramatic, just the normal texture of a working month.

For the first two weeks, estimates were written down before starting each task, and actual time was logged after finishing it, with no changes made to behavior in between. The point of this first half was only to measure the gap, not close it yet.

What the Two Weeks Showed

Task	Estimated	Actual	Overrun
Quarterly report draft	3 hours	5.5 hours	83%
Client email round	45 minutes	1.25 hours	67%
Presentation deck	2 hours	3.75 hours	88%
Weekly status update	20 minutes	35 minutes	75%

The overrun wasn't evenly distributed and it wasn't small. Every task ran long, and the shorter, more "routine" tasks ran proportionally longer than the big, obviously complex ones, likely because routine tasks get less careful thought at estimate time in the first place.

The Padding Rule

For the second two weeks, one rule was applied to every new estimate before committing it to the calendar: take the honest first guess, then add half again on top of it. A task that feels like two hours goes on the calendar as three.

Task	Padded Estimate	Actual	Held?
Quarterly report draft	4.5 hours	5 hours	Close
Client email round	1.1 hours	1.2 hours	Close
Presentation deck	3 hours	3.5 hours	Close
Weekly status update	30 minutes	32 minutes	Held

None of the padded estimates were perfect. All of them were close enough that the day’s other commitments stopped absorbing the overflow, which was the entire point. A padded estimate that’s slightly generous costs nothing. An unpadded estimate that runs long costs whatever was scheduled directly after it.

Applying This Yourself

The rule is deliberately crude: add fifty percent to your first honest guess, every time, without negotiating it down because a task feels simple. Track the results for two weeks the same way this case study did, in the blank table below.

Task	Padded Estimate	Actual	Held?

If your own padded estimates still run short after two weeks, the rule isn’t wrong, the multiplier is. Move it to sixty or seventy percent and measure again, rather than abandoning the practice because one number didn’t fit.

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