The Planning Fallacy

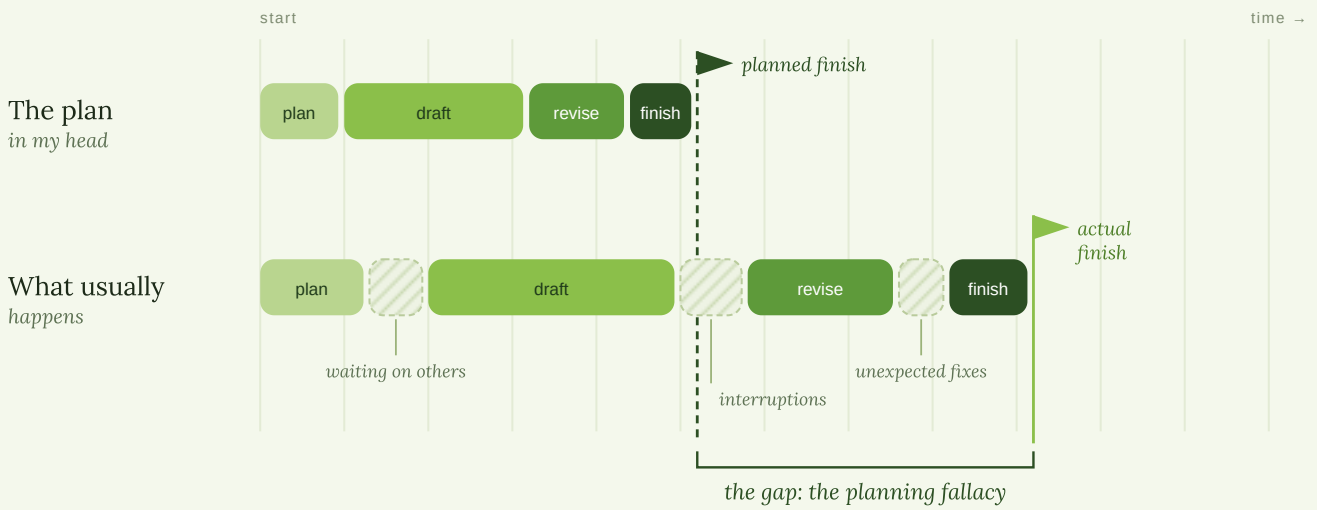
PSYCHOEDUCATION · TIME, EFFORT AND OPTIMISM

Why we systematically underestimate how long things will take, and how difficult they will be

Described by Kahneman and Tversky: our tendency to predict tasks will go faster and more smoothly than they do, even when similar tasks have run late before.

01 The plan in my head, and what usually happens

original illustration



02 Why it happens

a very human bias

The inside view

We picture this particular task, step by step, rather than how similar tasks usually go.

"This time will be different."

Best-case thinking

Our mental plan tends to assume things go smoothly, with no hold-ups.

"If I just focus, it'll be quick."

Hidden steps

Small sub-tasks, waiting and fixes are easy to overlook when we estimate.

"I forgot I'd need to..."

Discounting the past

We often treat past delays as one-offs, so they don't inform the next plan.

"That was just bad luck."

03 Planning more realistically

strategies with research behind them

Look back first

Ask how long similar tasks actually took, not how long they should take.

Unpack the task

List every step; breaking tasks down tends to make estimates more realistic.

Plan for hold-ups

Expect interruptions, waiting and fixes, and leave room for them.

Add a buffer

Build extra time into the plan, especially for important deadlines.

Try a pre-mortem

Imagine it ran late. What most likely caused that?

04 Planning one task

try it with something coming up

THE STEPS INVOLVED	MY FIRST ESTIMATE	A MORE REALISTIC ESTIMATE

Last time something similar took...

Likely hold-ups or hidden steps...

My buffer, and my new finish date...

It isn't laziness or a character flaw

Running over time is extremely common, even for careful planners and experts. Knowing about this bias can reduce self-criticism, and help you plan with more kindness and realism.

When it adds to stress

Over-optimistic plans can lead to rushing, overwhelm and feeling behind. Realistic plans leave room to rest and do things well.

SOURCES

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