

Estimating with Tee Shirt Sizes

by Mike Cohn •

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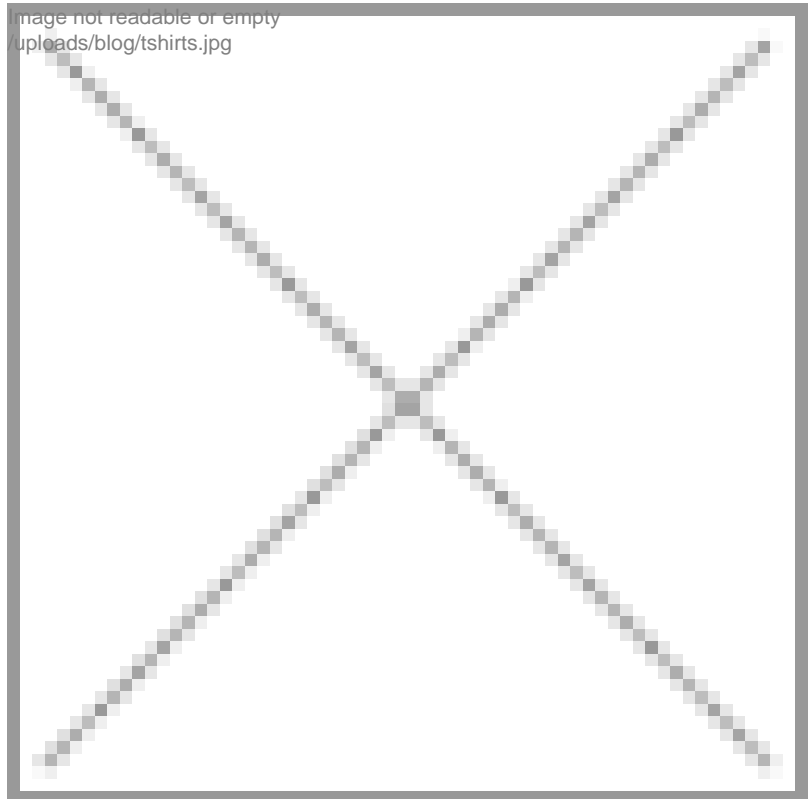
I occasionally encounter the use of t-shirt sizes (Small, Medium, Large, or so on) in use as estimating units by teams. T-shirt sizes are an OK approach to getting started with relative estimating, but they suffer from two severe weaknesses:

- They aren't additive. You cannot tell a boss you'll be done in 3 mediums, 4 larges, and 2 petites.
- Your view of an XL may not match mine. You may think it's 50% bigger than an L; I may think 25% bigger.

Teams get around both weaknesses with some underlying assumptions (hopefully stated) about size. They may, for example, state, "Let's call a medium a 5 and a large a 10."

The primary advantage to t-shirt sizes is the ease of getting started. If a team needs to start with t-shirt sizes, that's fine. Later, though, that team will be better off using numbers directly. I might forget that an XL is 33% bigger than an L. I won't forget that a 10 is twice a 5. (If I do, the team has a different problem!)

T-shirt sizes can be a great way of becoming accustomed to relative estimating. So, start with them if your team finds that easier. But minimally put some underlying numbers on them (e.g.,



Medium=5) and then gradually shift to using the numbers directly.

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Tagged: scrum teams, estimating, transitioning to agile

About the Author

As the founder of Mountain Goat Software, Mike Cohn specializes in helping companies adopt and improve their use of agile processes and techniques to build extremely high-performance teams. He is the author of *User Stories Applied for Agile Software Development*, *Agile Estimating and Planning*, and *Succeeding with Agile*. Mike is a founding member of the Agile Alliance and Scrum Alliance. Mike can be reached at hello@mountaingoatsoftware.com. If you want to succeed with agile, you can also [have Mike email you a short tip](#) each week.
