

The scheduling lie – DEC Dragon processor development

Digital Equipment Corporation led the creation of the "second wave" of the computer business, better known as the Minicomputer generation. I was a project leader on a computer development for the 3rd round of products in the PDP-11 series. The objective was not only to replace the 2nd round processor with a more capable computing engine, but also to enable the creation of multiprocessor systems. My work was primarily on the system bus that enabled the multiprocessor configuration.

Creating a new system bus causes all of the design work to take longer, because every system component must interface to the new bus. As our project was chartered, complete with a new program manager and a new group manager, my team committed to give realistic estimates of the time required to complete the design. The resulting 2-year schedule was submitted and we began work. About 9 months later, as we were just bringing up the first working model of the system bus, an experienced CPU engineer from another group put forth a proposal to do a simple update of the previous product without the multiprocessor capability. He offered this update on a schedule which was much more aggressive – that is, he claimed to be able to finish well before us. By this time there were pressures from the market that made it difficult for the company to wait, so our project was scrapped and the proposed update product was started.

Being relatively new to role of project leader, I had not been aware that project leaders routinely created aggressive schedules that they could not meet. The update project actually completed in the month that my schedule had predicted completion of our multiprocessor version – many months late, from the standpoint of their initial schedule. The lesson is that you must know what the customary schedule "lie" is in your company when you submit a schedule. If you are changing the "lie", you had better make sure that you explain it clearly and have backing for it from management several layers up.

Ultimately, the multiprocessor bus went on to be implemented in the next generation system, called VAX. But the project team that originally created it did not get to make a product.

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