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# **Trial and Terror – Why "Adjusting Durations Until It Works" Is Not a Strategy**

### **Welcome to the Dark Art of Schedule Manipulation**

If you have ever sat in front of a schedule, mindlessly tweaking activity durations until the project miraculously fits within the deadline (project's finish milestone), congratulations—you have committed one of the most dangerous scheduling sins.

This is not scheduling. This is playing Tetris with time and hoping no one notices.

At some point, every project scheduler has been tempted to use the Trial-and-Terror method (yes, terror—not error). It goes something like this:

1. The project finish milestone is set in stone. No negotiations. Take it or leave it.
2. After scheduling, the project finish date is three months later than the contractual milestone.
3. Management is staring at you, waiting for a solution.

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### 4. You start... “adjusting.”

- "What if I shave two weeks off earthwork?"
- "Maybe construction magically happens in 50% of the time?"
- "Let's just overlap tasks that can't really overlap, and... perfect! We did it!"

**Spoiler alert:** No, you did not.

## The Anatomy of a Trial-and-Terror Schedule

A schedule built on Trial and Terror looks great on paper but collapses on impact when exposed to real-world conditions. Here is how it happens:

### Step 1: Set Impossible Durations

- “Sure, let's pour concrete and install drywall on the same day!”
- “Who needs procurement lead time? Let us just pretend materials appear instantly!”
- “We'll finish system testing in half the time—what could go wrong?”

### Step 2: Ignore Resource Constraints

- The same crew is magically working in three locations at once.
- The key specialist is expected to work 26 hours a day.
- The subcontractor you squeezed timelines on just ghosted you.

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### **Step 3: Overlap Everything and Hope for the Best**

- Critical approvals and construction activities happen at the same time.
- Equipment arrives before the plinth is ready.
- Final testing happens before the system is even installed.

### **Step 4: Call It "Optimised" and Submit**

- The schedule fits the finish milestone.
- The PM and executives are happy.
- You go home feeling like a fraud.

### **Reality Check: The Aftermath of a "Trial-and-Terror" Schedule**

**Week 1:** Everyone is impressed with the efficiency of the new schedule.

**Week 2:** The first "unexpected" delay occurs. (Spoiler: It was completely expected.)

**Week 3:** Resources start missing key dates because the schedule was based on fantasy.

**Week 4:** The first "urgent recovery meeting" is scheduled.

**Week 6:** The schedule is officially irrelevant, and teams start working based on instinct.

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**Week 8:** Someone suggests bringing in a consultant to "fix the schedule."

**Week 10:** The consultant rebuilds the schedule exactly as you had it before all the tweaks.

**Week 12:** The PM calls you into their office and says, "So... what happened?"

Your only answer:

*"It worked fine in the software!"*

### The Illusion of Success: Why People Keep Doing It

So, if adjusting durations blindly never works, why do people keep doing it? Simple:

- ◆ **Short-Term Approval.**

- The PM is happy. The client is happy. Your boss is happy.
- (Until the schedule implodes.)

- ◆ **The Need to Hit Finish Milestone—At Any Cost.**

- *"We can't tell management this won't work. Just make it fit."*
- (Management finds out anyway... later.)

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### ♦ Hesitation to Oppose

- *"If I say the timeline is impossible, I'll look incompetent."*
- (Actually, adjusting durations without reason makes you look worse.)

### ♦ Blind Faith in Scheduling Software.

- The tool lets you do it, so it must be okay, right?
- (The software does not care if your project fails.)

## Best Practices: What to Do Instead

So, how do you avoid the **Trial-and-Terror** trap and build a realistic, defensible schedule?

### ■ Start with Real Data.

- Base your activity durations on historical performance and expert input.

### ■ Identify True Constraints.

- Don't just "force fit" dates—understand what is driving them.

### ■ Run What-If Scenarios.

- Test different approaches before committing to a timeline.

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### ■ Use Buffers Wisely.

- Pad high-risk activities without creating hidden float traps  
(Such as usage of improper logic links & constraint misuse)

### ■ Communicate with Stakeholders.

- If management demands an impossible schedule, show them the risks.

### ■ Oppose on Unrealistic Deadlines.

- *"If we want to hit this date, we need more resources or a scope adjustment."*

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### Final Thought: You Can't Cheat Time

At the end of the day, time is not a flexible resource. You can't just "adjust the numbers" and expect reality to cooperate.

So, the next time someone asks you to "just tweak the schedule until it fits," take a deep breath, look them in the eye, and say:

*"Would you rather have an honest plan or a pretty lie?"*

Because when it comes to scheduling, only one of those will actually get the job done.



**Before:** Version 1: Highlighted conflicts with contractual finish deadline.

**After:** Version 7: Carefully and creatively hides them.