

## 4

# Crafting Schedules to Fit Contractual Commitments – The Dark Side

### The Illusion of a Feasible Schedule

In the world of project management, few things are as tempting—or as dangerous—as manipulating a schedule to fit contractual commitments rather than actual execution realities. In order to satisfy contractual requirements, some schedulers craft schedules that look perfect on paper but bear little resemblance to what is realistically achievable. Welcome to the realm of **"The Dark Schedule,"** where deadlines are met through manipulation rather than proper planning.

This deceptive practice is often justified under the guise of "aggressive but achievable planning," yet in truth, it is a high-stakes gamble that frequently results in cost overruns, project delays, and damaged reputations. The danger lies in the gap between what is promised and what is possible—where physics, resource availability, and project constraints are disregarded in favour of wishful thinking. Or, as experienced schedulers like to put it: Just because you put a Ferrari logo on a golf cart doesn't mean it's going to win the race.

## The Methods of Schedule Manipulation

There are several ways that schedules are manipulated to appear compliant with contractual obligations while masking underlying risks:

1. **Artificially Shortened Durations** – Task durations are arbitrarily reduced with no real adjustments to construction method or resources. A job that normally takes four weeks is forced into two, based on unrealistic expectations. It's like assuming that assembling a jigsaw puzzle will take half the time just because you invite twice as many people to help. Instead of speeding up the process, it often leads to confusion, mistakes, and people getting in each other's way—ultimately causing more delays than if it had been planned properly.
2. **Stacking Activities Unreasonably** – Instead of scheduling activities based on realistic dependencies, tasks are overlapped in ways that defy actual work conditions. Think of it as trying to cook a five-course meal in the same pan, all at once. Such practice creates a false sense of completion until reality exposes the gaps.
3. **Ignoring Resource Constraints** – Another hallmark of the dark schedule is assigning the same resources to multiple critical tasks simultaneously, creating unrealistic expectations for multitasking. Who doesn't love being in two places at once? This leads to severe bottlenecks, conflicts over resource allocation, and delays that could have been anticipated with proper planning. Who doesn't love being in two places at once?

## Confession of a Project Scheduler

### **4. Underestimating Procurement and Approval Timelines –**

Assuming that materials, permits, and inspections will be delivered or approved faster than historical data suggests. Because obviously, bureaucracy will work faster this time, right?

### **5. Deliberately Omitting Risk Contingencies –** Presenting an optimistic schedule without factoring in potential setbacks such as adverse weather, supply chain disruptions, or labour shortages. Spoiler alert: it will rain, the shipment will get delayed, and someone will call in sick.

### **6. Inappropriate Task Constraints:** One of the first tricks in the dark scheduler's playbook is the misuse of task constraints. Instead of allowing tasks to flow naturally based on real dependencies, constraints such as "Must Finish On" or "Finish No Later Than" are applied arbitrarily to force the schedule to align with contractual deadlines. This gives the illusion that work is on track, even when delays are creeping in unnoticed. When reality clashes with these rigid constraints, tasks cannot adjust dynamically, leading to sudden and unmanageable schedule slippage. It's like forcing a square peg into a round hole—sure, you can hammer it in, but something's going to break

At first glance, these tactics may appear to satisfy contractual obligations, but the consequences of such manipulation inevitably surface once execution begins—kind of like realising too late that your diet of doughnuts and coffee wasn't the best marathon training plan.

## **Conclusion: The Price of Playing with The Dark Schedule**

Sure, these sneaky scheduling tricks might keep the contract police off your back for a while, but the bill always comes due. Projects built on fantasy timelines tend to spiral into delays, budget blowouts, and the kind of stakeholder disappointment usually reserved for bad sequels.

Instead of bending reality to fit impossible deadlines, schedulers should champion data-driven planning, honest forecasting, and proactive risk management. A solid schedule isn't supposed to be an optical illusion—it's meant to be a roadmap to success, not a ticking time bomb waiting to explode.

## **Case Study: The High-Profile Collapse of a Manipulated Schedule**

A multinational contractor secured a high-profile commercial building project with a completion deadline that aligned perfectly with the client's needs. To win the contract, the project team submitted a schedule showing completion in 24 months—despite internal estimates indicating that at least 30 months were required for realistic delivery.

### **The Early Warning Signs**

From the outset, project managers and field engineers raised concerns:

- The construction sequence was flawed, with overlapping activities that could not physically be executed concurrently.
- The procurement team had no guarantees that long-lead items could be delivered on the assumed timeline.
- The proposed workforce plan relied on hiring specialised labour where such expertise was already in short supply.
- Complex M&E systems needed testing and commissioning time, which couldn't be bypassed.

Despite these warnings, executives insisted on adhering to the unrealistic schedule, arguing that "momentum" and "extra effort" would bridge the gaps.

## Confession of a Project Scheduler

### **The Unravelling**

As predicted, the compression of the schedule led to a cascade of failures:

- Critical path delays mounted as rushed activities resulted in errors requiring rework.
- Procurement delays led to idle crews waiting for materials, inflating labour costs.
- Overlapping activities created conflicts, as trades struggled to work in congested spaces, leading to inefficiencies instead of gains.
- Rework became rampant as rushed activities failed quality inspections, setting the project back further.
- Worker fatigue and turnover increased as the pressure to perform under unrealistic conditions took a toll.

### **The Outcome**

The project ultimately was completed in 32 months, exceeding the original timeline by eight months, despite the unrealistic 24-month target. Worse, cost overruns soared due to rework, rush premiums, and penalties for missing contractual milestones. The leadership team responsible for the imposed deadline quietly moved on to other ventures, leaving the project team to clean up the mess.

## Confession of a Project Scheduler

### **Conclusion: The Price of Deception**

While it may seem expedient to craft a schedule that "fits" contractual commitments rather than reality, the consequences of such manipulation are severe. A project schedule should be a tool for managing execution—not a deceptive instrument used to win bids or appease stakeholders. When a schedule is built on manipulation rather than sound planning principles, it becomes a time bomb waiting to explode. The question is not if it will fail, but when—and how much damage will be done in the process.

### **Strategies for Crafting a Feasible Schedule**

#### **1. Break Down the Contractual Deadline**

Rather than viewing the project as a single fixed deadline, break it down into manageable milestones that align with key phases of the project. This approach allows for better tracking, early detection of delays, and adjustments without breaching the contract. It helps in compressing or shortening the schedule realistically by allowing for early issue detection, parallel execution, and phased work adjustments. Here's how:

- **Identifying Flexibility** – Instead of treating the deadline as one rigid date, breaking it into milestones (procurement, permitting, construction phases, commissioning) helps uncover areas where tasks can be optimised or fast-tracked.
- **Overlapping Work (Fast-Tracking)** – By setting clear milestones, teams can identify opportunities for parallel execution. For example, if procurement is a milestone, prefabrication can begin while site preparation is ongoing, reducing waiting time.

## Confession of a Project Scheduler

- Early Risk Mitigation – If a milestone like foundation completion is slipping, corrective actions (extra shifts, alternative materials) can be implemented before it impacts the entire project, avoiding last-minute schedule compression.
- Prioritisation & Resource Allocation – With clear milestones, critical resources can be assigned more effectively. If interior finishing is a separate milestone, manpower and materials can be adjusted dynamically instead of reacting to an unrealistic final deadline.
- Phased Handover – Instead of pushing everything to the final day, milestones allow for phased turnover (e.g., testing completed sections early), ensuring commissioning and troubleshooting don't cause last-minute delays.

By structuring the project around logical milestones, schedule adjustments become proactive rather than reactive, making the timeline both compressed and achievable without violating the contract and creating chaos.

### **2. Validate the Sequence of Activities**

A common mistake in force-fitting schedules to fixed deadlines is sequencing activities unrealistically. Ensure that:

- Critical dependencies are maintained (e.g., structural completion before finishing work).
- Lead times for materials, permits, and inspections are accounted for.
- Parallel execution does not compromise safety or quality.



## Confession of a Project Scheduler

### 3. Use Schedule Compression Techniques Wisely

When deadlines seem tight, consider:

- Fast-tracking: Performing certain tasks concurrently, but only where feasible.
- Crashing: Adding extra resources to shorten duration, considering cost and efficiency.
- Phased Handover: Delivering sections of the project earlier while others continue.

### 4. Build in Contingency Without Violating the Deadline

A robust schedule should account for unforeseen issues while still respecting fixed deadlines. This ensures that unexpected delays do not derail the entire project. Below are some strategies three effective ways to incorporate contingency into your schedule without openly extending the timeline:

- Hidden Buffers: Instead of adding obvious extra time, distribute slack within non-critical activities. For example, if a task is expected to take 10 days but has some flexibility, schedule it for 12 days. This way, if delays occur, they do not directly impact the overall deadline.
- Contingency Tasks: Identify high-risk activities and insert optional float where possible. For instance, if a critical inspection is scheduled, add a placeholder task labeled as “review buffer” that can be removed if everything goes smoothly.

## Confession of a Project Scheduler

- Risk Mitigation Plans: Develop alternative strategies to handle potential delays in key tasks. For example, if material deliveries might be delayed, have backup suppliers ready or pre-schedule overtime work as a contingency measure.

By strategically integrating these techniques, project managers can safeguard against disruptions while maintaining the official deadline, ensuring smoother project execution.



*“It’s all fun and games until the deadline is two weeks away.”*