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Ask the Teacher – December, 2005

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Question: We were putting together a schedule for a software development project and we had a series of tasks to schedule that were all the same. The duration, work and resources were the same. In fact, we didn't care what order they were worked. We wanted to let the developer work them as he wished. What would be the 'best' way to schedule these tasks?

Answer: I believe this is a fairly typical situation. Usually a team member will start on a task, have to stop because they are waiting on something, starts another task while they are waiting and then goes back to the first task later. Most of us don't have the luxury of being assigned to one task at a time.

To schedule this, you have a few options.

First – Enter the tasks and link them in a finish-to-finish relationship so they will all complete on the schedule at the same time.

1) Enter the tasks as fixed unit tasks. Assign the resources as a percentage of units on each task. This would work because even if the tasks are the same duration, the resource calendar will allow scheduling as needed. So if you have 4 tasks, assign the resource at 25% on each task. Work will be divided over the 4 tasks.

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2) Enter the tasks as fixed work tasks. Assign the resources to a percentage of units on each task. If more than one person is on each task, you might have to adjust the tasks for the hour's distribution between the resources. If they are 4 identical tasks and the resource is assigned at 25% each, the tasks should be the same length and work divided evenly given that the resource has full availability.

3) Don't use fixed duration – you will lock yourself into a specific timeframe. If the tasks take longer, you must increase the length of the tasks (and probably the work on the tasks) to drive the tasks. This will cause more maintenance for the PM. Also, if you are assigning resources at a percentage of their availability, it will only look at the availability within the timeframe of the task because the length is fixed.

In the top 2 cases, you are allowing the resource availability calendar to determine the length of time the task would take. Assignments in both cases are a percentage of the resources available time based on their calendars. The completion of the tasks will really be driven by the tracking method – posting hours per task per day per resource will be more accurate than using percent complete.