

The Business Value Game

v1.1

Playing to learn
How to release the right products with
the right features at the right time

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Why and when to use this session

Format and length

90 minutes tutorial and simulation game.

Sample timeline:

| Length | Total | Contents |
|--------|-------|-------------------------------------|
| 5' | 5' | Create teams and hand out materials |
| 10' | 15' | Play iteration 1 and explain rules |
| 10' | 25' | Play iteration 2 |
| 10' | 35' | Debrief first two iterations |
| 15' | 50' | Play iterations 3-4 |
| 10' | 60' | Debrief iterations 3-4 |
| 15' | 75' | Play iterations 5-6 |
| 15' | 90' | Final debrief and conclusions |

When and why

Use this session to:

- Involve salespeople, product managers and executives in an agile improvement project
- Extend agile planning from iteration planning to release planning; from prioritising stories to prioritising client requests and products
- Clarify the concept of “Business Value”
- Complement the “XP Game” and answer questions raised by the XP Game. Where the XP Game concentrates on iteration planning and the developer role, the Business Value Game concentrates on release planning and the client role.

Participants

People who are involved in release planning: product owner, product manager, salesperson, development lead, tester, project manager, scrum master or coach, people who teach or coach these roles.

Developers, so that they can learn the reasons why the iteration plan they have to implement can seem counter-intuitive.

Maximum number of participants: +/- 15 (= +/-3 teams) per coach.

Coaches

At least one coach per 2-3 teams to:

- Introduce the theory
- Manage the simulation
- Moderate debriefing and discussion

- Provide hints and tips. If a coach manages more than one team, they can let one player act as a proxy coach.

The coach should be familiar with Agile, especially the client and planning techniques, and have experience of applying it in real projects. They should also have basic coaching and session leading skills and experience.

Prepare for the session

Prepare the session materials

Print out a set of Client Persona Sheets, Client Request Sheets, Story Cards and one Iteration Sheet (see “Session materials”) per team.

Lay out the room

You need a large table with chairs per team. Ideally, all players can sit on one side of the table. Spread out the tables evenly over the room, so that teams do not disturb each other.

Each team gets paper and pencils, a die, the Iteration Sheet and the first set of Client Persona Sheets, Client Request Sheets and Story Cards. Over the following iterations, more Client Request Sheets and Story Cards will be handed to the teams.

Prepare the participants

Invite the participants to the session and make the goal of the session clear: to *experiment* in a safe, fun game with methods for prioritising development to maximize delivered value. You can tailor the following session description for your invitation.

Short session description to tailor for your invitation

Objectives: learn how to assign business value to projects and stories, prioritise and make plans that bring value. Learn how to teach this.

Contents:

Agile teams want to deliver maximum business value. That's easy if the Onsite Customer assigns business value to each story. But how does the Customer do that? How can you estimate business value?

How do you decide between stories? How do you decide between projects? How do you decide between clients?

This session gives you some simple business value estimation techniques that are "good enough" for everyday use.

The session is run as a game, where teams of 'businesspeople' have to make plans for their development team. The goal of the game is to deliver the highest possible business value, like in the XP Game. This game is a complement to the XP Game: how do these 'business value points' on the XP Game story cards get chosen?

Each businessperson in the team represents one (or more) clients who will buy the team's product IF their feature(s) is in the product. The team is going to have to make some tough decisions. The team is going to have to disappoint some clients, because the development team has a finite capacity.

We provide the clients and their wishes. We provide a well-performing development team. We suggest the techniques to estimate business value. The rest is up to you.

Run the game – Introduction

Introduce the session and set up the simulation

Goal of the session

Each team tries to earn as much money as possible over a number of iterations. A team earns money by:

- Releasing products that contain features that clients requested
- Keeping clients happy
 - The team are paid “goodwill” money at the end of the game based on client happiness level
 - Clients whose happiness reaches zero leave. All their requests become invalid.

Create the simulation team(s)

Form teams of 5-6 players. Ideally, each team contains a good mix of different roles from different companies or departments within a company. One way to create balanced teams is to group participants by the role they have in real life, and then form teams by taking one person from each group. There are three roles in the game:

- The “Salesperson” brings in requests from one or more clients
- The “Development team” receives the set of stories to implement each iteration and mark the stories as completed
- The “Accountant” keeps the score, verifies that the team follows the rules and serves as an observer during planning.

Each team has one coach who plays the two roles of “Development Team” and “Accountant”. If a coach leads more than one team, one of the players in the team can take on those roles. In that case, the team should call the coach to verify the acceptance of stories and requests. If any player has a question, they should ask the game coach.

Hand out the game material

Each team gets a set of Client Persona sheets. Divide the sheets over the “Salesperson” players. Each player represents one or more Clients.

Each team gets a package of Client Request sheets. Each player gets the Client Request Sheets for the Clients they represent. In future iterations, the team will receive new Client Request Sheets, which will contain more attributes. In the first iteration, only the basic attributes are present, to make it easier to explain the rules of the game.

Each Client Request Sheet has a set of Story cards. There is one extra Story Card in iteration 1: a Release Story. If this Story is chosen for implementation, all implemented features will be released, so that the product can be shipped to the Clients.

The “Development team/Accountant” player gets an Iteration Sheet. This will be used to keep track of the value that the team delivers.

Each team gets a die, pencil and paper and a handout with a summary of the rules.

The rules of the game

The goal of the game is to:

- Earn as much money as possible by releasing products
- Make clients as happy as possible by releasing products.

The players each represent a client. Clients submit requests to the team. Each request consists of a set of stories. Each story has a cost in “points”, estimated by the development team. Each iteration, the development team can implement a number of stories. The development team’s capacity is limited: they can implement about 15 points worth of work.

To implement a request, all its stories must be “implemented” by the development team so as to satisfy the acceptance criteria of the request. But the client doesn’t pay for implemented requests; they pay for product releases that contain the request. To release the product, the team must ask the development team to prepare a release by including the “Release Card” in the list of stories to implement. A release card has a cost too.

Each iteration, the team:

1. Looks at the outstanding client requests and assigns business value to the requests.
2. Assigns a business value to each of the stories, based on the value of the request.
3. Compute business value/cost and sorts the stories based on business value/cost.
4. Decides if this iteration will be released. If so, the “Release Card” is added to the list of stories for the release.
5. Selects the stories for the iteration so that the sum of the cost of the stories is less or equal than the number of points the development team can implement.
6. Hands the ordered list of stories to the development team and notes on the Request Sheets which stories have been implemented and released.
7. Updates their iteration sheet
 - a. Indicate if a product was released in the ‘Release?’ column.
 - b. Add the Business Value of all completed client requests to the ‘BV Points’ column.
 - c. If the product was released, add all new Value to the ‘Earned’ column. This is the amount of money earned from client payments. **This is the primary variable we want to optimize to win the game!**
 - d. Put the planned number of points of the development team in the ‘Planned’ column.
 - e. Put the actual number of points that the development team delivered in the ‘Actual Velocity’ column.
8. Updates their Client Persona sheet
 - a. If no request of this client was released, decrement client happiness by one.
 - b. If requests were released for this client, add the happiness value of the request to client happiness. **This is the second variable we want to maximize to win the game!**

Each iteration lasts only a few minutes, so the teams should not waste too much time in discussion.

Run the game – Iteration 1

The goal of the first iteration is to teach the participants the rules of the game. The coaches guide the players through each of the steps.

Step 1: Assign Business Value

In the first iteration, we do the simplest thing that could possibly work:

- We set the value of the request equal to the price paid by the customer
- We distribute the value of the request evenly over all stories in the request.

For example, if we have a 4-story request that is worth 2000€, the request has a business value of 2000 and each story has a business value of 500. Write the business value on the story cards. Don't worry; assigning business value will become more complicated later on in the game.

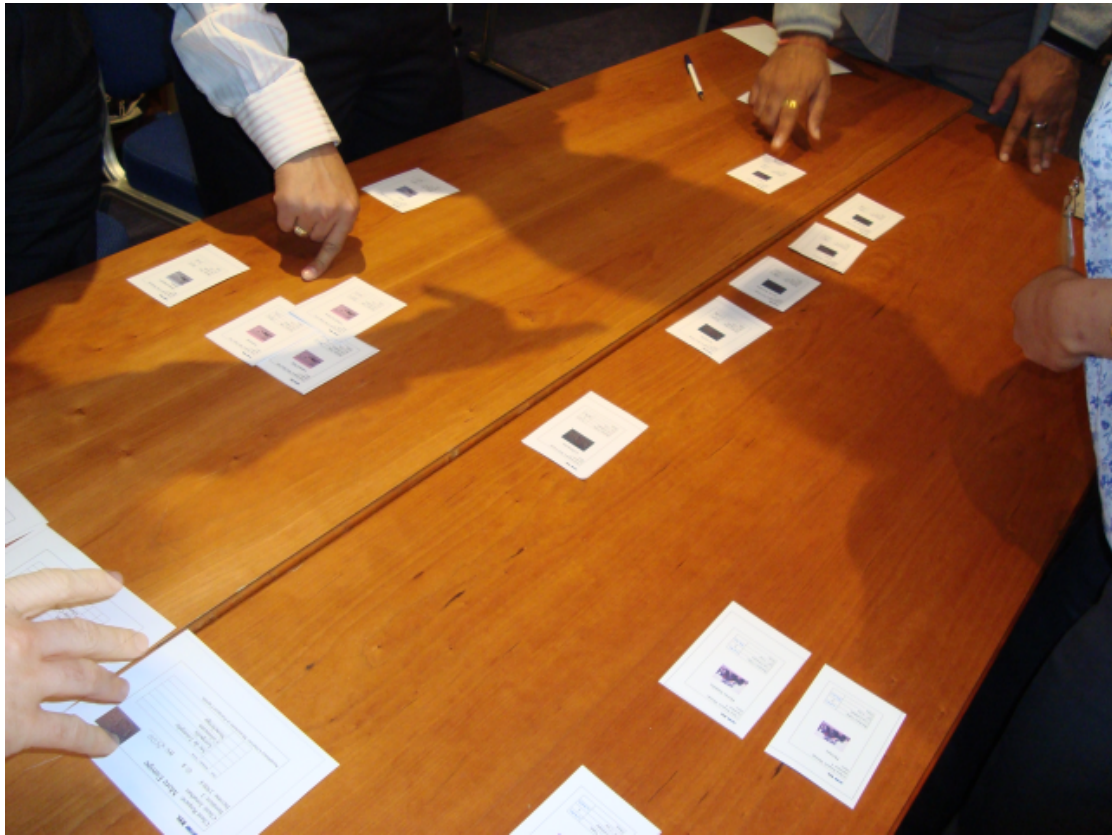
Step 2: Sort the stories by Value/Cost

Lay out the story cards vertically in the middle of the table, such that the story with the highest Business Value/Cost value is at the top.



(Picture by Portia Tung)

Slide the stories horizontally (to keep them sorted) so that stories of the same request are each laid out in their own vertical line. You should now have as many vertical lines with sorted stories as there are requests.



(Picture by Portia Tung)

Step 3: Select stories for the iteration

Select stories for implementation starting from the top, the most valuable stories. Your development team can implement 15 points per iteration, so the total cost of the stories should be less or equal to that. Keep the selected stories in the order you want them implemented by the development team.

When selecting stories, keep these factors in mind:

- You want to maximize business value implemented, so as to maximize income when the product is released.
- Clients pay for complete requests, not individual stories.
- Clients become less happy the longer it takes to release their requests

Step 4: Can we release?

Each iteration, the team must decide if they want to release the product. Release as often as possible, because that's how you get paid and how you make customers happy. On the other hand, releasing has a cost. Include the "Release Card" in the backlog to let the developers build a release.

Step 5: Implementation

Hand the sorted list of stories to the “development team” player. This player marks each story as done, as long as the total cost of the stories is less than or equal to the “velocity” of the development team: 15 points.

The players mark the stories as implemented on their Client Request sheets. If the product is released, the players mark the implemented stories as released on the Client Request sheets.

Step 6: Calculate the results

The Iteration Sheet is updated by the “Accountant” based on Customer Requests that have been completely implemented (all stories implemented) or completely released (all stories released):

- Indicate if the product was released
- BV Points: Business Value of all Requests completely implemented in this iteration
- Potential Value: Income of all Requests completely implemented in this iteration
- Earned Value: IF this iteration is released, all Potential Value that was not yet earned
- ROI: Return on Investment is 0 in the first iteration. We will use it from the second iteration.
- Total: Earned Value + ROI
- Planned: base velocity of 15 points
- Actual velocity: same as base velocity, but this will change later

| Iteration | Released Y/N | BV points | Potential Value € | Earned Value € | ROI € | Total € | Planned Velocity | Actual Velocity |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|---------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Y | 1800 | 1800€ | 1800€ | 0€ | 1800€ | 15 | 15 |
| 2 | | | | | | | 15 | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | |

The example above shows how the team performed in iteration 1. They completely implemented a request worth 1800€. In the first round, Business Value equals Income, so they have 1800 Business Value Points. Because they released their product, their Potential Value becomes Earned Value. The Total income is 1800€.

Each player updates their Client Persona Sheet:

- If a request for this customer was part of the product release, increase customer happiness by the happiness value indicated on the request.
- Else, decrement customer happiness by one.

Summary of the first iteration

The teams have gone through one iteration. Verify that everybody understands the goals and rules of the game. The structure of the following 8 iterations will be similar, but we will gradually introduce some more difficult situations. We will run two more iterations and then look back on what happened. From now on, we will assign business value to the requests by comparing with the requests from previous iterations.

Run the game – Iteration 2

Second iteration

The extra Client Requests and Stories marked for iteration 2 are handed to the teams. A few new features are introduced in this iteration. Explain these changes before the players start planning.

Estimating business value by comparing

New requests are introduced with the same income as requests from iteration 1, but with a different customer happiness result. Business value is assigned to the request by comparing with existing requests. If two requests have the same income, the one with a higher customer happiness value will have higher business value. From now on, we will always assign business value by comparing with other requests.

Developer variation

In the first iteration we knew the exact velocity of the development team. The velocity of real teams is more variable: they will implement a bit less or a bit more than their average velocity. To simulate this, the “Development Team” player throws a die to determine the real velocity. Display the following table prominently:

| Die throw | Velocity |
|-----------|----------|
| 1 | -3 = 12 |
| 2 | -2 = 13 |
| 3 | -1 = 14 |
| 4 | = 15 |
| 5 | +1 = 16 |
| 6 | +2 = 17 |

If the velocity is less than 15, the “Development Team” implements all stories in the order given by the players, until the total cost of the stories is less than or equal to the velocity. If the velocity is higher than 15, the team can select an extra story for 1 or 2 points. Write the actual velocity in the Iteration Sheet. In the following iterations, the team should prepare a plan that takes into account this variation.

Players have to order their stories carefully, based on business value, so that the most valuable stories are least likely to get dropped from the iteration. This includes the “Release Card”!

Release improvement

The team gets a “Release Improvement” card. This card has a cost in points, like the stories. When this card is implemented in the iteration, the cost of future releases is reduced to 1 point.

Return on Investment

When we release requests to our clients we get paid. We can use this income to invest in other projects. Each round, we gain a Return on Investment of 10% of our Total income, rounded down to the nearest multiple of 100€.

Thus, there is a large difference between Potential Value (future income due for features implemented but not released) and Earned Value (money earned now for released features): the latter represents real money that we can invest to bring more value. Releasing early and often has a dramatic effect on cash flow and income over time.

Fill in the Iteration sheet

There are two changes in this round:

- The actual velocity may be different from the planned velocity, due to the die throw.
- We need to calculate the Return on Investment we get from the money we earned in earlier iterations. The money we invest has a return that is about 10%. $ROI = 10\%$ of the previous iteration's Total, rounded down to the nearest multiple of 100€. ROI is like compound interest, the sooner we earn money, the bigger the effect on ROI.

Example sheet:

| Iteration | Release Y/N | BV points | Potential Value € | Earned Value € | ROI € | Total € | Planned Velocity | Actual Velocity |
|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|---------|------------------|-----------------|
| 1 | Y | 1800 | 1800€ | 1800€ | 0€ | 1800€ | 15 | 15 |
| 2 | N | 1700 | 1500€ | 0€ | 100€ | 1900€ | 15 | 16 |
| 3 | Y | 3200 | 2500€ | 4000€ | 100€ | 6000€ | 15 | 15 |
| 4 | | | | | 600€ | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | | |

The example above shows an iteration sheet after three iterations. What happened?

- In iteration 1, a Customer Request worth 1800€ was implemented and released. The team's total earnings are now 1800€.
- In iteration 2, a Customer Request with Business Value of 1700 points and an Income of 1500€ is completed, but not released.
- In iteration 2, the money earned from the previous iteration is invested and returns $100€ = 1800€/10$, rounded down to the nearest multiple of 100€. The Total earned by the team is now $1800€ + 100€ = 1900€$.
- In iteration 3, a Customer Request with a Business Value of 3200 and an Income of 2500 € is released. Because the product was released, all Potential Value becomes Earned Value. Thus, $\text{Earned Value} = 250 € + 1500€ = 4000€$.
- ROI in iteration is again $100€ = 1900€/10$, rounded down.
- Total Earned in iteration 3 = $1900€$ (previous total) + $100€$ (ROI) + $4000€$ (Earned Value) = $6000€$.

Debrief Iterations 1-2

Hold a brief standup meeting with all the players. Ask each team to announce their team name and earned value. Display the scores prominently to encourage competition. We will update the scores after iterations 4 and 6.

Ask each team the three standup questions:

- What have you done: which strategy did you use and what was the result?
Teams shouldn't be afraid to share their ideas and techniques with the other teams. After all, Agile is all about collaboration. Remember: the goal of the game is to maximise each team's income, not to minimise the other teams' income.
- What will you do: which strategy will you use in the next iterations?
- Impediments: is there anything that is unclear or needs to be resolved?

Some further questions to ask:

- Why are there differences in earned value?
- Is the prioritisation process easy and fast to implement? If not, why not?
- How did you decide to release?
- What changes have you made to the basic prioritisation process? How did you deal with dependencies? What were the results?
- How did you estimate the value of the Release Improvement card? Did you improve your release process? Why? Why not?
- How happy are your customers? How did you optimize customer happiness?
- How did you negotiate the priorities? Did each player defend 'their customer' or did you look at the global picture? Remember: the goal is to have maximum earned value and customer happiness per team, not per player.

Run the game – Iterations 3 and 4

The teams have 15 minutes to perform both iterations. Keep the team informed of remaining time. As soon as they've completed an iteration, the team should call their coach to verify if all the acceptance criteria of the requests have been honoured.

Third iteration

The extra Client Requests and Stories marked for iteration 3 are handed to the teams. A few new features are introduced in this iteration. If the players don't pay attention to the acceptance criteria and constraints on the Client Requests, the coaches may gently remind them to "look at the small print". The coaches should ensure they verify that all the constraints are satisfied at the end of the release. The team will learn a memorable lesson if the coach rejects a release because some constraints weren't obeyed.

Dependent requests

Some Client Requests can only be started if another request was previously released. For example, the "Castle Extensions" request can only be started if the "Castle" request was previously released. The basic prioritisation process is still the same, but the customer representative now has to take this constraint into account when selecting stories. This constraint might lead to implementing stories with lower business value (first request) before stories with higher business value (dependent request). The "Accountant" should verify that the constraints are satisfied before recording the value of the requests.

We only give the stories after they have released the dependent request.

Acceptance Criteria

Client Requests have acceptance criteria: a client test to validate that the implementation satisfies all the needs of the client. The "More Europe" request has as acceptance criterion "Monuments in European Capitals". Attentive players will spot that "Stonehenge" is not a building from a capital. The request will be accepted even if the "Stonehenge" story is not implemented; this story has a business value of zero!

Not all teams will notice this fact. Be sure to mention the acceptance criteria during the debrief. A similar situation will arise in later iterations.

Development team improvement

The team gets a set of "Team Improvement" cards. These cards have a cost in points, like the stories. When all three cards are implemented, the average velocity of the team is increased from next iteration on. Put the new planned velocity in the Iteration Sheet. The die modifiers (-3 to +2) are still applicable to the new average velocity.

Fourth iteration

The extra Client Requests and Stories marked for iteration 4 are handed to the teams. A few new features are introduced in this iteration. If the players don't pay attention to the constraints on the Client Requests, the coaches can gently remind them to "read the small print".

Request based on client happiness

When clients have to wait long for their releases they may lose trust in the software developer. When a client's happiness goes below zero they leave and go to a competitor. Some clients will leave before that: Arnold will only place a new order if his happiness is more or equal to four. Sometimes it's best to decide to no longer serve a certain client, but to concentrate on other clients.

Look at business value/cost

The Mars Exploration request seems to have a really low value. But the business value/cost of the request is high. Small requests with small cost can be very useful to "fill out" releases if there are a few points of velocity left or to release quickly and earn money quickly.

Client deadlines

The Mars Exploration request has a client deadline. The request must be released in iterations 4 or 5; otherwise the client won't accept the release.

Debrief Iterations 3-4

Hold a standup meeting with all players. Ask each team to announce their earned value. Display the scores prominently to encourage competition. We will update the final scores after iteration 6.

Ask each team the three standup questions:

- What have you done: which strategy did you use and what was the result?
Teams shouldn't be afraid to share their ideas and techniques with the other teams. After all, Agile is all about collaboration. Remember: the goal of the game is to maximise each team's income, not to minimise the other teams' income.
- What will you do: which strategy will you use in the next iterations?
- Impediments: is there anything that is unclear or needs to be resolved?

Some further questions to ask:

- Why are there differences in earned value?
- What parameters do you take into account to determine business value?
- How did the acceptance criteria affect your decisions? If none of the teams noticed that "Stonehenge" has zero value, mention it.
- Did you implement the Development Team Improvement cards? Why? Why not?
- How happy are your clients? How does that affect your decisions?

Run the game – Iterations 5 and 6

Fifth iteration

The extra Client Requests and Stories marked for iteration 5 are handed to the teams. A few new features are introduced in this iteration.

Cheap request with acceptance criteria

The Mars Spaceport is another low value/low cost request. The Business Value/Cost of the stories is a lot higher if you notice that the “Belgian Chocolate Shop” is not really necessary to fly back to Earth from Mars.

Sixth iteration

The extra Client Requests and Stories marked for iteration 6 are handed to the teams. A few new features are introduced in this iteration.

Client demo to increase happiness

The second part of the Amusement Park allows the players to increase client happiness by giving a demo of the children’s attractions. The players can earn this happiness by including the stories in an iteration, before the stories are released. Some of the stories in the request bring more value than the others. Therefore, assign more of the request’s business value to those stories that need to be developed first to be included in the demo.

Final debrief

Calculate the final scores

Each team calculates their earned value.

Each player calculates the “goodwill” of their client: client happiness * 100€

The total score is earned value + goodwill.

Each team announces their final score and the winning team gets a prize.

Debrief

Some questions to ask:

- What strategy did the highest scoring teams use?
- What have you learned?
- How will you apply what you learned back at work?

Business Value tips and techniques

The goal of the final debriefing is to come up with a set of techniques and heuristics that participants can use on real projects.

A few tips:

- Look at the whole and reward appropriately. For example, if you reward salespeople based on the contracts they negotiated, they will be motivated to assign ‘their’ clients’ projects a higher priority *even if this leads to a lower income for the company as a whole*.
- Start by collecting some useful base *estimates*: extra income that can be generated, income that could be lost if the product does not contain a feature, how much the client wants the feature, deadlines...
- To estimate the value of a request, start by the estimate of value added of the sale. Adjust the value based on client importance, client happiness, potential of further sales, risk... The simplest way to do that is to compare and assign request business value relative to some baseline requests.
- Prioritise requests based on business value/cost. Adjust the ordering to take into account deadlines.
- Don’t over-analyze Story Business Value: start by distributing Request Business Value evenly over all the stories in the request. You can always adjust business value to indicate that some stories are more important or urgent than others.
- Define acceptance criteria for Requests and evaluate all Stories against them. The best way to improve delivery time and to decrease development cost is to implement only the stories that are really needed.
- Value is generated by releasing features, not by developing stories. Microsoft used to have the motto “*We make money by shipping software, not by developing software*”.
- Focus. Sometimes it’s better to satisfy one client and lose another than to have two unhappy clients.
- Know your developer capacity and limit the intake of requests and stories accordingly.

- To close the feedback loop, compare actual sales per client with estimated business value per client. Track client satisfaction to see if your estimate of client happiness is correct.

What is Business Value?

Business Value is not a value.

Business Value is a function: its value changes over time.

Business Value is a function of what you value: the parameters (Business Value Currencies) taken into account when estimating business value say a lot about what you really value. An example of a business currency is Revenue. Another is Time. Yet another is Customer or Team Happiness.

Business Value = f(Business Value Currencies)

If you want to know more

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Vera and Pascal founded the Belgian XP users group, developed the “XP Game” and are among the founders of XP Days Benelux.

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Everybody who played the game and gave feedback.

Session materials

Client Persona sheets

Appendix 1 contains a number of sheets that describe a client, and contain the client's happiness score. The players represent these clients at the planning meetings. Each team needs a set of Client Persona sheets.

The sheets are handed to the team over the different iterations, as indicated on the sheets.

Client Request sheets

Appendix 2 contains a number of sheets that describe a Client Request for one of the clients on the Client Persona sheets. Each Client Request Sheet contains:

- A Client Request name and short description
- The name of the Client who made this Request
- Happiness factor: how much happier the Client will be if this Request is released.
- Price: what the Client will pay when this Request is released.
- A list of Story names that belong to this Client Request. Each Story has 2 checkboxes that the participants can use to follow up on the status of the game. The first checkbox means “implemented”, the second one means “released”.
- Some requests have acceptance criteria that define the test(s) that the stories in the request have to pass.
- Some requests have conditions that need to be satisfied before the client will accept the request.

Each team needs a set of Client Request sheets. The sheets are handed to the team over the different iterations, as indicated on the sheets.

Story cards

Each client request is subdivided in a number of stories.

Each Story Card contains:

- Story name and short description
- Name and picture of the Client Request that contains this Story
- Story Effort points (as estimated by development team)

The players have to assign business value to the story. Appendix 3 contains the story cards.

Iteration sheet

Appendix 4 contains a sheet where the team writes their results per iteration. At the end of the game, the team with the highest earned amount of money on their iteration sheet wins.

Rule Summary

Appendix 5 contains a sheet that summarises the rules of the game.

Dice

Each team needs a die, to determine how many story points their development team can implement in an iteration.

Pens and paper

To fill in the sheets, perform calculations. Do not allow calculators to be used: defining business value should not be so complicated that you can't do it by hand.

Timer

The coaches should keep the teams to the timings as described in the session timeline so that the whole game can be played in the allotted time. Make it clear to the players that they should only use simple methods and strategies.

Ideally, use a visible timer like an hourglass or a kitchen timer, so that everyone in the team is aware of elapsed time.

License

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