

GUIDE

The Evil Twins

A playbook for spotting and stopping underquoting and over-delivery in life sciences consulting firms



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Introduction

Two silent profit killers are at work inside every life sciences consulting firm. They might not seem too worrying at first glance, but they can quickly become devastating. They creep into proposals, projects, and client relationships. They wear down consultants and quietly eat away at profit.

If you run fixed fee projects in your firm, they'll suck the profits right out of your business if you don't take the necessary steps to eradicate them.

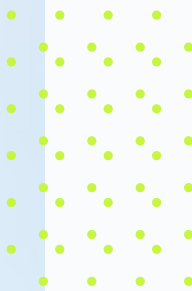
Meet the Evil Twins: **Underquoting & Over-delivery.**

Evil Twin #1: Underquoting

The temptation to win at all costs

Underquoting often starts innocently. A business development lead wants to stay competitive. A partner is keen to land a marquee client. A project lead underestimates the hours because “we’ll find efficiencies along the way.”

But what looks like a clever move in the proposal room is a trap. A lowball quote locks you into unrealistic margins from day one. The project kicks off already behind the curve, with delivery teams scrambling to make up ground that was lost before the work even started.



Evil Twin #2: Over-delivery

Death by a thousand good intentions

Consultants are wired to solve problems. They see issues, they want to fix them. In life sciences especially, clients lean on you as trusted advisors, and it feels natural to give them more than they asked for.

A little extra slide here, an unbilled workshop there. A “quick” piece of market research that ends up taking days. Each act of generosity may seem small, but they add up. And the client soon sees this as standard service, not a favor.

The double-whammy effect

On their own, underquoting or overdelivering can quietly drain profit. Together, they're devastating. Revenue is capped at an unrealistic level, while costs spiral higher with every unplanned deliverable.

You end up with projects that look successful on the surface but are margin-killers underneath. Your team worked harder than ever, the client is happy... and your firm is worse off financially.

Why life sciences firms are especially vulnerable

Some industries can get away with a bit of underquoting or overdelivering. Life sciences consulting isn't one of them. The very nature of the work makes firms more exposed. Here's why:

Complex, ambiguous projects

Regulatory submissions, R&D portfolio strategy, market access - these projects rarely have clean edges. Ambiguity at the scoping stage makes it easy to underestimate the true workload.

High-stakes clients with high expectations

Pharma and biotech sponsors are buying confidence as well as time. They expect advisors to anticipate issues, smooth over gaps, and provide a level of polish that often goes beyond the contract.

Pressure to keep sponsors happy

Delivery teams know that client relationships are fragile. A delay or gap in scope risks more than just one project - it could jeopardize future work. That pressure drives over-delivery, often without anyone noticing until it's too late.

Consultant culture

Life sciences consultants are often perfectionists. That mindset leads to exhaustive analysis, additional insights, and "gold-plated" deliverables that clients never asked for but will always accept.

All of these create the conditions in which the Evil Twins thrive.



Spotting the signs in your firm

How do you know if the Evil Twins are running loose in your firm? Look for red flags in these areas:

Proposals and SOWs

- Estimates padded with “we’ll make it work” optimism
- Vague scoping language that leaves room for interpretation
- Discounts or “strategic pricing” used to win work

Delivery team behaviors

- Teams adding “bonus” slides, workshops, or analyses
- Consultants working long hours on unscoped tasks
- Client requests routinely absorbed without re-scoping

Financial warning signs

- Projects consistently closing below target margin
- Utilization looking fine, but profitability lagging
- Growth in revenue not matched by growth in profit

Staff & resource costs

- Consultant burnout
- High turnover in delivery teams
- Rising frustrations between business development and delivery

If more than one of these feels familiar, chances are you’re feeding the Evil Twins.

How to break the cycle

Spotting the problem is the first step. Fixing it takes discipline. But don't worry – we've created a step-by-step playbook to help you break the cycle and eliminate both twins.

EVIL TWIN #1

How to stop underquoting

Step 1: Pinpoint every task

Start by visualizing everything you'll need to do to complete the project and then, crucially, detail that within your fee estimate.

Putting numbers against each task will help you construct an accurate fee. It will also enable you to explain to your client how you arrived at the figure you have – and they'll be much more likely to sign off the job when they know how much work you'll be putting in.

Remember – some tasks will end up having to be re-done, so make sure you budget for those rounds of amends.

Step 2: Estimate how much time you'll need

Fortunately, this step is easier than you'd think – just research the most recent projects you've done of a similar kind and find out how they performed.

How long did they actually take to deliver? Did they go over budget? If so, why? Do you need to quote more to overcome these issues, or be clearer with the client about what's included in the scope?

We all think we know how long things take to do, but the reality is we're often well wide of the mark.

Step 3: Spell out to the client exactly what's included

This is perhaps the most crucial step of defeating this Evil Twin. If you give your client a price without a clear and detailed explanation about what's included, it's a recipe for disaster.

Makes your quotes as clear and detailed as possible, and budget for the deliverables you outlined – you can always bill the client for extra work.

Remember to regularly review what's actually happening and go back to the client if you need to.

Pro tip: Specify how many times the client can come back with revisions and make it clear that they will be charged extra for any work outside of that.

EVIL TWIN #2

How to stop overdelivering

Step 1: Give your team a well-defined scope

As important as it is to be clear with your client about what they can expect, it's equally as important to tell your team how long they've got to deliver the work.

It's crucial to drill into your team that first question on any project should be, "How long have we got?"

Getting your people into the habit of clarifying the scope before hitting the drawing board will help them gain focus, temper the scale of their ideas accordingly, and manage their time much more efficiently.

Step 2: Track time spent against your budget

Getting your team to fill in timesheet is essential to ensure you're not spending more time on a project than you've budgeted for.

The key with tracking time though, is to do so against specific tasks, not just the project as a whole. Doing so allows you to pinpoint any problem areas, and rectify any issues where necessary.

For example, if you notice that your team have booked extra time against a task, you can investigate why. If you learn that the client asked them for a fourth deliverable in addition to the quoted three, then you can justifiably bill the client for that extra work.

You can't do this if you're only tracking time against the project as a whole though, so be specific with those timesheets!

Step 3: Review and learn

The final step in eradicating over-delivery in your firm is to make a habit of project reviews.

Looking back at a completed project can help you identify what went well (so you can replicate it going forward) and any areas that went off-track for correcting next time out.

For example, if the project went over budget, you may have been able to get more money from the client if they went beyond the agreed spec.

On the other hand, if it turns out you under quoted in the first place, you can learn from that and make changes to how you quote for similar projects in the future.

Despite the temptation to immediately jump onto the next project, it's always worth spending some time reviewing what's happened so you can apply any lessons going forward.

What “good” looks like

Firms that stamp out the Evil Twins will see a significant transformation across the board:

Financial health

Consistent project margins and predictable profitability



Stronger relationships

Clients trust clear scoping and respect boundaries



Team sustainability

Consultants deliver high-quality work without burning out



Leadership clarity

Growth in revenue finally translates into growth in profit



Conclusion

The Evil Twins thrive in the shadows. The first step to beating them is to call them out. Recognize where underquoting and overdelivering are creeping into your projects.

You don't have to fix everything overnight. Small yet consistent steps can break the cycle, and embedding them into your processes – and into your delivery teams' minds – will help fend them off for good.

Further reading

For more tips, tricks and insights into addressing some of the challenges mentioned in this guide, check out our resources:

- [How to get people to fill in their timesheets](#)
- [How to strengthen your life sciences consultancy's network](#)
- [How to turn scope creep into an opportunity](#)
- [Why good communication is key to profitable client delivery](#)
- [Why you should invest in your consulting operations](#)
- [The KPIs every consulting firm should obsess over](#)
- [How to measure revenue and margin performance](#)
- [How to measure project financial performance](#)
- [How to measure people & resourcing performance](#)

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