



An Overview of Microsoft Project & it's Benefits to Project Managers

Background:

The concept of project management is an unfamiliar subject for many people. To some it brings up visions of large corporations or military operations engaged in projects like the space shuttle, nuclear power plants or ship building.

The reality is that Project Management is a big part of everyday life in the workplace. People, some of whom do not necessarily hold the title of Project Manager, engage in such activities as establishing goals, scheduling activities, assigning people to tasks and setting target completion dates every day. They document plans and try to follow them, making necessary adjustments along the way. They are engaged in Project Management.

We are all Project Managers every day of our lives - it is just that most of us don't appreciate that we already have the skills required to perform this function.

You can consider project management to be applied common sense, it can provide you with a framework within which to operate using tried and tested techniques and approaches to master your projects.

Project Management is becoming an ever more important skill in the modern working environment. As established organisations assume broader flatter structures individuals are required to manage projects, drawing on a range of skills within the organisation where in the past they specialised in a single area of expertise.

The current storm buffeting our economies is also likely to raise the profile and popularity of Project working as organisations and their employees become more accountable and subject to scrutiny as investors and regulators seek to protect the interests of those they represent.

The rise of the computer has allowed the development of sophisticated Project Management software that uses the processing power available to calculate changes to plans in milliseconds. These developments have seen Project Management become more accessible and have broadened its appeal as a management technique.

"Time is the scarcest resource, and unless it is managed nothing else can be managed." - Peter Drucker

Project Management Competences:

Successful Project Management requires a combination of competences.

The ability to prepare and plan for future action - envisaging a route towards achieving clearly defined objectives.

Communication - informing and enthusing participants in the project of its objectives and their part in achieving its successful completion.

Managing people - getting people to commit to a project is important, recognising that individuals can make significant contributions at every stage of the project is important.

Monitoring - once a project has commenced it is important to ensure that it proceeds as planned; this requires accurate feedback from participants and the need to anticipate potential problems rather than reflect on recent past performance when considering progress.

Controlling - decisive action - being able to identify the required course of action promptly when circumstances change and ensuring all relevant parties are advised of the reason for the change and the need to implement it.



Review - once a project is complete use it to learn for the future. A project can go wrong in any number of ways and goes right in exceptionally few. Analyse where it went both right and wrong and try to learn for future reference.

How Microsoft Project can help:

Microsoft Project is the market leader in Project Management software; it dominates the market for project scheduling tools but intriguingly is not the most popular tool for planning and managing projects. Bizarrely more people try to plan and manage projects using Excel or Access than use Microsoft Project.

As part of the Microsoft Office family Microsoft Project shares many common features with products such as Word and Excel. Ease of use and familiarity greatly enhance the intuitive learning of Microsoft Project by individual users. The ability to share information with other Office programmes further enhances Microsoft Project's value.

Microsoft Project is not a silver bullet solution; if you are a poor manager it will not instantly make you a better one. However if you are a reasonably competent manager it can support you in what you do. The analogy I employ in describing Microsoft Project is that it is more like a walking stick than a wheelchair; it supports you in what you do rather than taking over doing what you do.

Preparation:

Project allows the user to create projects step by step, gradually adding more detail and complexity as the project is considered in more detail. Adding additional information or amending what has already been done is easily handled by the software.

What if ? Project allows various scenarios to be considered, allowing the manager to make judgements based on an objective assessment of the implications of each set of circumstances.

Communication:

Having arrived at an acceptable and realistic project plan Microsoft Project allows the manager the option to communicate the plan in a number of ways in either a hard copy or via email or web browsers.

- GANTT charts for the entire project can be sent to relevant parties.
- Calendar views present exactly the same information but in a more conventional calendar format.
- Reports extract data from the project file and present it in easily understood document form.
- Filters allow project data to be communicated in a selective fashion - avoiding information overload.

Managing People:

People make projects happen - they can also disrupt projects if they are unavailable, committed elsewhere or overworked. Project allows the manager to review individual workloads and where possible to re-schedule or re-allocate work to avoid problems.

Updating, Monitoring & Controlling Projects:

Project allows the manager to review and compare actual progress with planned progress and to consider the implications of any variance. If at any stage progress threatens the target completion date Project will warn of a potential problem - it is then up to the manager to consider how best to resolve the conflict.



Information - different perspectives on your Project:

Project information as entered and updated can be presented in numerous ways to provide the project manager with different perspectives on the project. In addition to the different types of information available Project can show detail in global or fine detail allowing an over-view or in depth analysis of the various aspects of a project. Filters provide further scope to extract only relevant information – allowing the manager to focus on what is critical.

Reporting and Analysis:

Microsoft Project can deliver information in a variety of formats to suit the reporting needs of the organisation, a lot of this information can be delivered “by default” if you configure the solution to suit your needs and then commit to using the tool on a regular and consistent basis. If management have questions that need answering chances are your schedule can deliver the answers to those questions provided it is maintained and updated regularly.

At completion of a project the ability to compare outcomes with the original plan and to identify the variances and appreciate that caused them can be a powerful learning opportunity.

“If we do not learn from history we are condemned to repeat it.” – Georges Santayana

Conclusion:

Microsoft Project is a tool which gives you visibility over your plans, it handles scale, complexity and perhaps most importantly of all **CHANGE** so that you can respond to change in an informed and effective fashion working pro-actively rather than re-actively.

Used wisely it can be a significant aid to managing projects more effectively.

Next Steps:

If you found this article of interest and would like more information on how to make Microsoft Project work for you and your organisation please contact us at Projectability either by telephone on 0044 8707 303 400 or by email at ask.expert@projectability.co.uk