

Tools of the trade



Project Management: Tools of the Trade Ask any ten project managers what is the most critical component of any project and you will likely get ten different answers. There is no phase that isn't critical from inception, to planning, cost estimating, and completion. How does the successful manager keep a complex project on schedule and under budget This is where the project manager turns to modern project management tools to aid them in everything from basic team communication to risk assessment. These tools are what the manager relies on to allocate time, money, people, and materials.

Effective team leaders have recognized the excessive time that it takes to develop good communications. According to Pam Jones (2006), " Leaders commented that communication took up between 50 and 70 per cent of their time". Since a project is a team effort, communication is a basic key to helping assure the endeavor stays on schedule. Conventional e-mail still relies on the hub and spoke method for transferring information among team members. A recent move has been made toward Digital Group Memory (DGM). This tool centralizes communication based on the objective, rather than the chronological reply method. All team members can input data, update progress, and share thoughts across the entire platform. As Jackson (2005) points out, it is a way "[...] to empowered team members who actively participate in planning and management". This shift away from centrality places greater responsibility on the team members.

David Oates (2006), Vice President at Primavera Systems, points out the limitations of team communication. He contends that, "[...] while real time collaboration can cure many of the communication difficulties regularly encountered by project teams, these tools are not sufficient for strategic

assessment of projects" (p. 5). Oates recommends broader portfolio based tools to offer CIOs and senior managers the information necessary to make a decision whether or not a project justifies its budget on a strategic level.

Team members updating data on a project, whether it is cost, time, or progress, will in most cases see the results in Microsoft Excel format. Though there are some web based spreadsheet tools available, the programming limitations have been some impediment to their success. Can-Plan 2006 is a small project management tool that uses Visual Basic for Applications and MS Excel. The beauty of the Excel based program is its ability to turn data into graphical charts and graphs. Can-Plan manages about two dozen project functions from overall progress, cost escalation, and Gantt charts.

Gantt charts are the most effective method of looking at overall project flow.

Though Charles Gantt first put them into use nearly 100 years ago, they have stood the test of time and technology has improved on them greatly.

Modern Gantt charts are often spreadsheets that allow the manager to see the timing and progress of the project's key components. They can reflect major milestones as well as indicate inter-dependency of the workflow.

Project management tools are designed to give the manager the most up-to-date and accurate information available. Real time team communications, project progression, constant risk assessment, and detailed scheduling information are the tools that contribute to the success of any project in our real time global world.

References

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