

Challenges of Using Microsoft Project in a Team Environment

Introduction

Microsoft Project is undoubtedly the most popular project management software around. First introduced over a decade ago, Microsoft Project was initially developed as a standalone application. It was never intended to be used in a network/Internet enabled world.

Usage Pattern

Most small and medium businesses today have a working Local Area Network (LAN) and use the Internet frequently in their daily activities. Project management teams today are also often distributed across geographies and time zones. This underlines the need for distributed project management software application even more. Most people today use inefficient methods to do distributed project management using Microsoft Project.

Scenario 1 - Shared Access to Microsoft Project File

In this situation the Microsoft Project files are kept on a shared drive and everyone on a team is given access to it. Sometimes different types of access privileges are assigned - some users (including the project manager) may have full read-write access, others only have a read-only access.

Advantages

1. Users are familiar with opening files from shared drives
2. The file can be backed up easily

Disadvantages

1. No change control
2. Heavily depends upon people to do the right thing
3. Users may forget where the file resides and have to be reminded
4. Possibility of corruption
5. No global view of portfolio for executives
6. Each user must have a copy of the correct version of Microsoft Project installed on their machine, which is costly and takes a lot of time to install and maintain

Scenario 2 - Status update using Microsoft Excel

In this case the project manager retains the Microsoft Project file with himself and uses a Microsoft Excel template to ask team members to provide status information.

The project manager receives updates via email which he then transfers manually (cutting and pasting) into the Microsoft Project file.

Advantages

1. All users already have Excel
2. Cheaper to implement compared to multiple copies of Microsoft Project

Disadvantages

1. Much time is wasted - painful to cut and paste
2. Error prone
3. Team members can only see a small portion on the whole picture
4. No global view of portfolio for executives

Scenario 3 - Multiple Copies of Microsoft Project With No Shared Access

In this case the whole team has copies of Microsoft Project. Instead of keeping the file on a shared file server the Project Manager keeps the master copy and sends it via email to the team to input their changes (which must be manually put back into the master file) or to view the latest schedule.

Advantages

1. Users can make direct changes to all database objects, not just tasks

Disadvantages

1. Costly - must purchase many copies of Microsoft Project and install and maintain them one each user's machine
2. Version mismatch issues - users can never be sure they are working on the most current version
3. Difficult to maintain data sanctity
4. No global view of portfolio for executives
5. Team members must be trained on how to use Microsoft Project

Scenario 4 - Microsoft Project Server or Other High-End Groupware Project Management Solutions

If the company has tens of thousands of dollars they may choose to put in Microsoft Project Server or some other high-end Project Management application.

Advantages

1. Designed to be used in a distributed environment
2. Eliminates many of the challenges of the other scenarios (making sure you are working on the most current version of the file, access to the schedule for executives, etc.)

Disadvantages

1. Very expensive - can easily cost \$75k-\$100k to purchase the necessary solution
2. Difficult to install - requires dedicated resources and can take several weeks
3. Difficult to use - requires training of end users and administrator

The ValleySpeak Approach

ValleySpeak Project Server provides a much better solution than any of these alternatives. It can be installed in minutes, and provides the power and flexibility of high-end solutions at a far more affordable price.

ValleySpeak Project Server provides a browser based viewer and access for your team to update Microsoft Project schedules. It also includes collaborative tools such as issue tracking, discussion forums, project portfolio management and a project dashboard. The table below summarizes the benefits associated with using ValleySpeak Project Management Server software in conjunction with Microsoft Project.

Features	Benefits
Browser based access to Microsoft Project files for team members	Project Managers can continue using Microsoft Project while team members can access project status from any computer running any operating system, leading to dramatically lower costs than buying Microsoft Project for each team member.
Total change control for Project Managers	Be sure that only certain team members have privileges to be able to make changes to the project status details.
Uses Microsoft Project database schema for complete two way integration	No need to import, export or synchronize data - everything is automatically updated in real time and everyone on the team is always using the most current version of the schedule.
Discussion forums	Collaborate with team members in a central place to capture and discuss important issues and decisions.
Issue Tracking	Keep projects on track and make sure critical tasks don't fall through the cracks.
Roles-based dashboard	Provide a quick overview of the project status to executives and team members.
Automated Backup and Easy Restore	ValleySpeak Project Management Server backs up projects automatically at recurring intervals in addition to any manual backups that the Administrator desires. The administrator can choose to restore the automated backups or the manual backups at any time from the simple web interface. The time for the automated backup can be set by the Administrator from the web interface.
Easy server installation that includes all required components	Install on stock PC hardware in a single step by entering 4 pieces of information into one form on screen. Automatically installs operating system and database.
Compatible with Microsoft Project 2000/2002/2003	No need to worry about which version of Microsoft Project people are using, designed to work with Microsoft Project 2000, 2002 and 2003 (both Standard and Professional versions) on Windows 2000 and Windows XP.
Works with all versions of Windows, Mac OS, Linux and other operating systems that support standard browsers. (Internet Explorer 6+, Netscape 6+, Mozilla 5+, Firefox 1.0)	Full cross-platform support allows team members in a heterogeneous environment to have full access to Microsoft Project schedules, project management and viewer capabilities.
Embedded Linux operating system* <i>(*But you'd never know it unless we told you!)</i>	The most popular operating system software used on the Internet today. Allows for seamless and reliable connectivity and productivity.

Highly secure solution with built-in firewall and 128-bit secure browser access

Be assured that your project status details remain confidential within your team. Guard against attacks and security breaches. (Pre-configured, no Administrator intervention needed)